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# The Context of Social Work with Children

This chapter introduces the operational context of modern work with children and families, policy agendas, the structure of the children's social care sector and the contextual factors that impact upon both policy-making and operational decision-taking in children's work. An important aim is to familiarise readers with the language of childcare.

## Policy Context: Every Child Matters

Following the Laming Report into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming 2003), the government launched a new agenda for children's services based upon a green paper 'Every Child Matters' (Department for Education and Skills 2003). Sister papers followed: 'Youth Justice: The Next Steps' (Home Office Youth Offenders Unit 2003) set the agenda for work with young offenders; 'Youth Matters' (Department for Education and Skills 2005) considered wider youth issues; and 'Care Matters' (2006b) proposed future policies for 'looked after' children. Legislation, especially regarding the structures for the delivery of services for children was enacted in the Children Act 2004. This saw the setting up of children's trusts which brought together the function of local education authorities and children's social services and integrated the relevant services provided by health and other agencies.

The Every Child Matters agenda is shown in Practice Context 1.1. Perhaps the biggest challenges will be delivering in the newer policy areas: 'enjoyment', given the pressure to achieve and linked emotional problems (see chapter 9), and 'health', given the unhealthy lifestyles chosen by many of the modern generation of children (see chapter 10) (Hunter and Payne, n.d.). Although the 'safeguarding children' agenda signals a shift in emphasis from child protection to a wider range of services for many children, concerns have been raised that child protection services could be undermined by reduced funding (Munro and Calder 2005). At the same time, an effective shift towards preventative services will be impossible without increased funding (see chapter 7).

**16** CRITICAL PRACTICE IN WORKING WITH CHILDREN**PRACTICE CONTEXT 1.1****The ‘Every Child Matters’ agenda**

‘Every Child Matters: Change for Children’ is about the well-being of children and young people from birth to age 19. The government’s aim is for every child, whatever their background or circumstances, to have the support they need to:

- be healthy
- stay safe
- enjoy and achieve
- make a positive contribution
- achieve economic well-being

Organisations involved in providing services to children – from hospitals and schools to police and voluntary groups – will be working in new ways, sharing information and working together, to protect children and young people from harm and help them achieve what they want in life. Children and young people will have far more say on issues that affect them as individuals and collectively.

Every local authority will be working with its partners, through children’s trusts, to find out what works best for children and young people in its area and to act on it. They will need to involve children and young people in this process, and when inspectors assess how local areas are doing, they will listen especially to the views of children and young people themselves.

*Source:* adapted from Department for Education and Skills 2003.

**Organisational Context**

In order to make sense of their working environment and place individual decisions within a wider context, it is important for practitioners to understand the organisational and social factors that locate children’s services. This section discusses the various agencies in which contemporary childcare is carried out and the wider context in which the agencies and their practitioners operate.

**Statutory Childcare Work**

‘Statutory childcare work’ suggests activity in working with children, their families and other carers sanctioned by the state, usually through legislation. The word ‘work’ implies a paid task, a service provided by an individual or organisation with some degree of public accountability. Of course most childcare activity is outside that framework, care being provided by parents and other relatives. An important policy consideration is the extent to which these voluntary carers should be rewarded for rearing the next generation. Arguably the boundary is moving in the direction of state intervention with policies such as funded childcare places and tax credits. There are also numerous carers on

the margins of the parent–professional spectrum: volunteers and those paid little for their services, for example child minders and some foster carers.

The main framework for the organisation, though not necessarily the direct provision of children’s services is children’s trusts, which are responsible for the childcare functions outlined in Practice Context 1.2.

## PRACTICE CONTEXT 1.2

### The functions of children’s trusts

1. Child protection: the threshold according to the Children Act 1989 is ‘significant harm’. There are close partnerships between social workers, the police, and health, education and other services.
2. Services to ‘looked after’ children, including managing placements for them.
3. After-care services under the Leaving Care Act 2000, often in partnership with the voluntary sector.
4. Services for children in need. In practice few resources are devoted to this due to budgetary constraints. Work with young children is targeted via children’s centres and work with older children is evolving based on ‘extended schools’. There may be some targeted preventative work, for example family support to avoid the need to provide ‘accommodation’. Some funds might be allocated to specific groups, for example to provide respite care for children with disabilities.
5. Adoption services, although there are still numerous voluntary adoption agencies, which now place mainly special needs children.
6. Education social work.
7. Youth work, including Connexions.

*In partnership with other agencies they provide:*

8. Youth offending teams (YOT).
9. Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).

In addition they provide education services, by far their largest function, and have a general strategic duty to meet the educational and welfare needs of children in their area. There are differing local organisational arrangements for such services as the youth service and child health which are integrated within children’s trusts to a greater or lesser degree. There are often complex organisational arrangements for the provision of services to children with disabilities where health, social work and education are involved, and for interactions with adult services where the parents have separate problems from the child, for example in cases of parents with mental health problems or substance abuse. There are greater complexities about how such partnerships will work now that adult and children’s social services are separate (see chapter 3).

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Childcare workers are increasingly employed in specialist teams, often multi-disciplinary or multi-agency, covering one or more of the above functions. Children's social services also tend to have an assessment team which undertakes core assessments under the common assessment framework before handing over longer-term work to specialist teams.

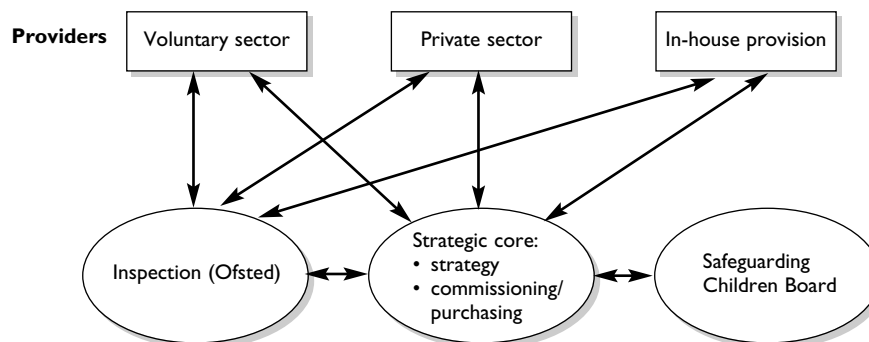
### The 'Mixed Economy of Care'

Although children's services have not formally adopted the care management model based upon the purchaser/provider split (as used in adult social care), there has always been a diversity of providers, from the large children's charities (Children's Society, Barnardo's, NSPCC and NCH), smaller voluntary agencies, private providers (most commonly residential homes) and individual carers (foster carers and child minders, for example). There is, however a move towards the 'contract culture', with services being commissioned from the private and voluntary sectors, and a trend for services to be planned and provided in partnership with other agencies.

### The Quango State

A quango (quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation) is a semi-independent unit of service provision operating at national or local level. There are models of partnership work where local authorities retain a lead role through a children's trust, including YOT and CAMHS, although these are effectively quangos. Much provision in health (NHS trusts) and education (trust schools) is from quangos, although strategy and some provision in these areas is delivered by children's trusts.

The main issue about quangos is accountability. They are usually managed by a selected board and receive government funding, but unaccountable through the democratic process except to a secretary of state in central government who has overall responsibility but is far removed. The board is often representative



**Figure 1.1** The components of the 'mixed economy'

of the partner agencies and there are usually independent members who are meant to be representative of the local community, but concerns can be raised about whether they are disproportionately recruited from the local elite.

### **The Voluntary Sector**

Voluntary organisations are usually registered charities and governed by Charity Commission rules, although some small local groups may not be registered. There is usually a management committee that oversees the work of any paid officers and determines the direction of the work within the aims and objectives set down in their constitution.

The dilemma for voluntary organizations is the extent to which they embrace the 'contract culture' and bid to provide services for the state. By doing so they can expand, but they may lose autonomy and their original mission be undermined.

Despite the Charities Act 2006 which largely addressed matters of governance, debate continues about how to rationalise the legal status of voluntary organisations. First, the extent to which charities can campaign: most try to press for change through running and evaluating exemplar projects. Some voluntary organisations, for example, Shelter, are not charities and see campaigning as their main purpose. Secondly, some charitable bodies, for example many public schools, have tenuous links with 'public benefit', the baseline for charitable status. Miller (2004) discusses the evolving role of the voluntary sector.

### **The Private Sector**

Private companies by definition seek to make profit and the major issue is whether profits and care mix. However, some providers in the private sector have broader motives, perhaps, having decided to leave a statutory service and 'go private' to gain more job satisfaction through the provision of a quality service. There was much rhetoric during the Thatcher years about competition promoting quality, choice and efficiency and this sector has consequently expanded. It appears that particularly with childcare placements, the private sector is often used as a last resort when no local authority resource exists. Although some no doubt provide a good service, regular scandals suggest that some provide very poor services at high prices, exploiting the desperation sometimes faced by social workers looking to place a very demanding young person. If contracts are awarded to private companies largely on cost grounds, it is possible that cheap also means poor quality. There are also questions about the exploitation of workers; with poor pay and conditions, and often poor training, staff of sufficient calibre cannot be recruited or retained.

Owners of private companies often receive no formal supervision unless they arrange consultancy for themselves. Their accountability is through the market system, based upon the assumption that purchasers will make rational purchasing decisions. They are also answerable to Ofsted Inspectors. There is a debate

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about whether real accountability should be achieved through the marketplace or through inspection (Miller 2004).

### **'Not for Profit' Organisations**

These sit somewhere between charities and private companies. Although they cannot declare a profit, their owners often pay themselves generous remuneration packages, which make them similar to private companies. They are overseen by a management committee although the degree of independence of such committees can often be questioned as the owners have control over the appointments. The most credible organisations will establish a management board of renowned local people able to offer real consultancy; for others the board will be a token gesture to a legal requirement.

### **Safeguarding Children Boards**

Safeguarding children boards hold a strategic overview of the local child protection system. They have wider responsibilities than their predecessors (area child protection committees) and can consider issues beyond the registration categories within the child protection system. They are representative of the agencies constituting the local child protection partnership and can have an independent chair or be chaired by a senior person from a partnership agency, often the director of children's services.

An important role is to investigate unnatural child deaths, not just those where the child was within the child protection system ('Serious Case Reviews', sometimes referred to as 'Part 8 Reviews'). Often such enquires are contracted to voluntary organisations such as the NSPCC, or to independent consultants.

### **Cafcass**

An executive agency of central government administered through regional offices, Cafcass provides a Guardian ad Litem who reports to the courts on the best interests of the child in public law cases, for example care proceedings, and reporting officers who report to the courts in private law cases, for example custody arrangements in a divorce. Their workers are a mixture of employed and sessional social workers. They are therefore independent of case-holding social workers.

### **Ofsted**

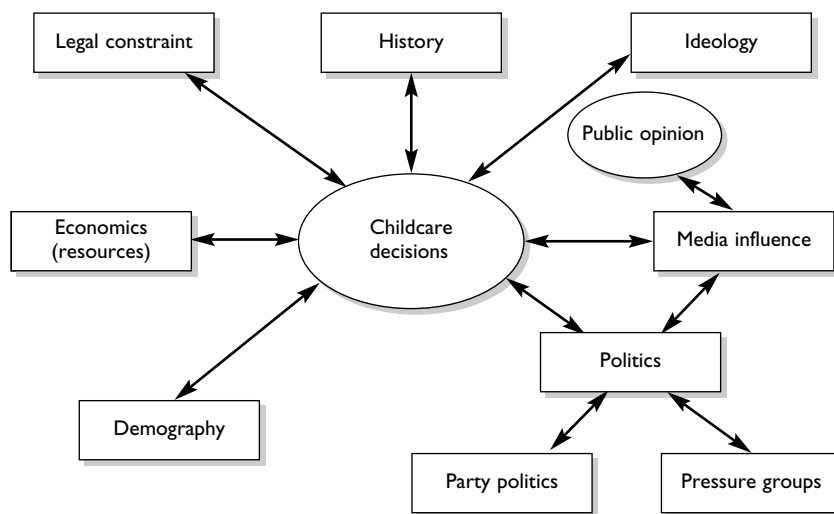
Ofsted have broadened their functions from inspecting educational services to inspecting all children's services falling under the remit of the DfCSF. This includes children's social services, but excludes youth justice. A children's rights director (CRD) is located within Ofsted with the main function of consulting with children about their experiences of using a variety of care services. A number of influential reports from the CRD will be discussed later.

### Children's Commissioners

Each country in the UK has a children's commissioner. Their function is to represent the views of children to government and elsewhere and to promote policies that benefit children and allow their views to be heard. They can commission research into areas of concern, but cannot investigate individual complaints unless asked to do so by government.

### The Context for Practice

It is important to understand the underlying factors that impact upon work with an individual child or family.



**Figure 1.2** The context of childcare decisions

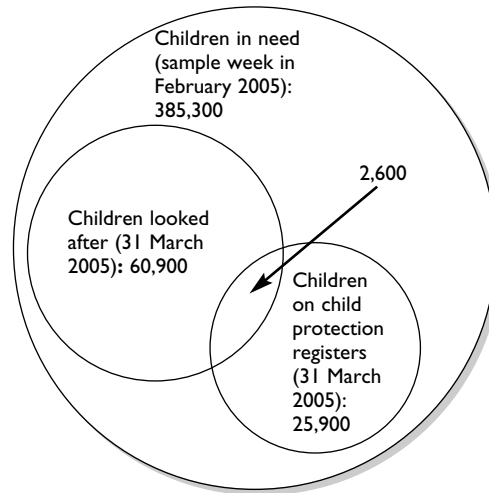
### The Law

The legislation quoted in this book relates mainly to England and usually applies in Wales. Each individual chapter will refer to the relevant legislation. Scotland and Northern Ireland have different but usually comparable laws. The three major legal categories for statutory childcare intervention and their numerical significance are shown in Figure 1.3.

The rule of law is a fundamental premise of a civilised, democratic society. Laws should represent the will of the people as expressed through the democratic process, and it is incumbent upon each citizen to stay within the law or face penalties for transgressions.

The law is an important factor in the social construction of childhood (James and James 2004). It defines when childhood ends and sets minimum ages for various forms of behaviour. There are of course contradictions, for example,

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**Figure 1.3** Numbers of children in need, children who are looked after, and on child protection registers in England.

Source: Department for Education and Skills 2006c.

sexual intercourse and marriage are allowed at 16 whereas one must be 18 to watch an adult movie or buy an adult magazine. Of more concern is that, although many laws relating to children are designed to promote welfare, most laws seem to restrict and control rather than empower children.

The law impacts directly upon practice through legislation and associated regulations. Central government also interprets the law and issues guidance and ministerial circulars (local authority circulars), that may not strictly hold the force of law, but any authority or worker not adhering to them can face severe criticism if things go wrong. Judicial precedents (case law created in the higher courts) also interpret the law in an increasingly litigious society. The law not only states what a worker must do (duties) and can do (powers), but through the principle of *ultra vires* that they cannot do things not specified in law.

Legislation affects social work through the impact it has on service users. As well as establishing their right to services (such as social security and housing), it also establishes a framework for conduct, determining what is legal and illegal. The role of childcare workers as advocates often derives from questioning the implementation of these laws. Increasingly, overarching legislation such as the Human Rights Act 1998 and freedom of information legislation particularly impact upon childcare workers and service users keen to assert their rights.

The law reflects power imbalances within society. It is largely men from the upper and professional classes who become legislators and judges and there is a complex debate as to what influences those in power. Although there has been a drive towards reducing social differences, ministers, judges and senior civil servants still come disproportionately from privileged backgrounds, often

having attended the best public schools and elite universities (Coxall et al. 2003). It is little wonder that they face concerns that they are out of touch with the experiences of ordinary people and tend to pursue policies which favour those in control of the resources in society.

A practitioner can face a professional dilemmas when he or she finds a service user breaking the law, particularly in residential care or a foster home where the premises are being used for illegal activity, including the use of illegal substances. While this is unlawful, the reality is that carers will be reluctant to jeopardise their relationships with young people by involving the police. There are other ethical dimensions to interpreting the law, for example if a worker feels that a service user is being oppressed by it. Examples will be discussed around the concept of the authoritarian state in chapter 8.

An important issue in jurisprudence (the philosophy of law) is the quantity of law. Some argue that society should be highly regulated through legislation while others feel that only minimum controls should exist. Post-war governments have favoured an increasingly regulated society, although a partial retreat could follow from the anti-regulation lobby, which often bases its case on European Union directives.

Practitioners can adopt a creative approach to the law. A good example was the use in the 1980s of pre-court diversion to avoid young offenders being subjected to harsh youth justice legislation. The way to avoid punitive criminal justice legislation was to use the systems approach to keep young offenders out of court (see chapter 8).

Judicial review is an important tool in holding public bodies to account. This High Court action can be used to question any decision of a public body that the complainant considers to be unreasonable in interpreting the law. It is an expensive action and most cases are test cases supported financially by pressure groups.

### **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)**

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified by 177 countries worldwide and by the UK in 1991.

#### **PRACTICE CONTEXT 1.3**

##### **Select articles from the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

**Article 2:** All rights shall apply to all children without discrimination on any ground.

**Article 3:** In all actions the child's best interests 'shall be a primary consideration'.

**Article 6:** Every child has the inherent right to life, and each country should ensure the child's survival and development to the maximum extent possible.

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**Article 12:** The right of the child to express an opinion and to have that opinion taken into account, in any matter or procedure affecting the child.

**Article 23:** The right of disabled children to enjoy a full and decent life, in conditions which ensure dignity, promote self-reliance, and facilitate the child's active participation in the community. The right of children with disabilities to special care, education, health care, training, rehabilitation, employment preparation and recreation opportunities; conducive to the child achieving 'the fullest possible social integration and individual development, including his or her cultural and spiritual development'.

**Article 28:** The child's right to education on the basis of equal opportunity.

**Article 29:** A child's education should be directed at developing the child's personality and talents, and mental and physical abilities to their 'fullest potential', that education shall prepare the child for an active and responsible life as an adult, fostering respect for basic human rights and developing respect for the child's own cultural and national values and those of others.

Source: United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

Sadly, the Children's Rights Alliance which monitors UK compliance with the Convention have regularly identified failings (see chapter 4).

### Influencing the Legislators

Childcare practitioners can attempt to influence the law by engaging with political processes both inside and beyond the workplace. Organisations such as trade unions and professional associations, most notably those representing the medical professions, have been successful in influencing policy. The Association of Directors of Social Services had only limited success in raising the political profile of children's work. It is hoped that the successor group, the Association of Directors of Children's Services, by combining the education and social care agendas, will be able to wield more influence, especially upon the minister for children and the children's directorate in the DfCSE. The profile of children will also be promoted by the children's rights commissioners in the constituent countries of the UK.

Pressure groups and children's charities are also important in influencing policy-makers. Most larger groups have policy units and employ lobbyists to influence government. When a new issue arises, it is possible for practitioners, academics and others to come together to form a new pressure group, for example ASBO Concern.

Individuals can also join a political party and seek to influence party policy at local or national levels, for example by attending the annual party conference where, in theory at least, party policy is determined. This should, through the manifesto, set the policy agenda if the party is elected to government.

### Working with the Media

Working constructively with the media is another strategy in promoting change. While the media particularly the tabloid press, can be criticized for emphasising and amplifying bad news (which is good news for them), it is possible to develop a more positive relationship that can allow the concerns of professionals and service users to be put before the public, thereby exerting political influence. It is an interesting debate as to whether media reporting reflects public opinion or whether public opinion is influenced by reporting.

Although social work is often invisible to the media, child protection tends to be the focus of negative media stories (Galilee undated report). It is difficult to counter stories about neglect by social workers (when a child is injured or dies), or over-zealous social work actions ('family wrecking'), as confidentiality dictates that social workers cannot justify their side of the case.

Some 'fly-on-the-wall' documentaries have been made that give a realistic 'warts and all' view of social work aimed at challenging the negative media image associated with social work through public education. In agreeing to allow a piece of work to be filmed, it is important to maintain editorial control as it is tempting for producers to edit their material to show the most sensational footage, thus distorting the reality, and thereby potentially showing social work in a bad light.

### Demography

Population trends affect the lives of individual children in at least two ways. First, the nature of the family or household in which they live, and secondly the wider social organisation of these domestic living units. Social constructions around 'family' are complex and can fail to embrace the variety of living situations faced by modern children. For example, kinship is often seen as a powerful factor defining a 'family', whereas many children live in households not involving 'kin', for example with foster carers or step-parents. We need another term that describes a household that comprises adults in a caring role and their children. Some demographic statistics from the 2001 census are given below.

Nearly 1 in 4 dependant children (2.67million) live in lone-parent families, 3 times higher than in 1971. Of these families, 91.2% are headed by the mother.

Lone parents, especially mothers, are unjustifiably stigmatised in the media as being the cause of childhood problems. These difficulties are probably better explained by the wider circumstances faced by lone parents, for example living on benefits and often in poor neighbourhoods. However, there are some real concerns for children living in lone-parent households, often including the lack of a role model of one gender.

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The incidence of step-parenting and children living in a variety of reconstituted households has also markedly increased with more than 1 in 10 children (1.28 million) living in a step family.

The implications of this include problematic relationships between children and step-parents, issues around contact with absent parents and the wider family, and the possibility of step-parent abuse. A particular child might experience several reconstituted 'families' as serial monogamy is the lifestyle choice for many parents.

It has been estimated that 28% of children can be expected to experience parental divorce or separation before age 16.

There is a strong relationship between divorce and emotional problems in childhood and it has been argued that children experiencing parental relationship breakdown should be deemed to be 'children in need', whereas at present problems need to present before help is offered (Douglas 2006).

There are many complexities around being a child in a reconstituted family. Even after a partnership has broken down, significant relationships might survive, for example between the child and the former partner's parents (informal grandparents). While these relationships might not be 'kin', they can provide a fertile source of support for the child. In assessments it is worth asking a child to map their 'significant adult relationships', perhaps around a criterion such as 'people I trust' as well as producing a genogram (similar to a family tree). Such relationships might also provide placement opportunities should the child be unable to live with the parent(s). Kinship care is discussed in Chapter 6.

One in 4 mothers with a child under 18 works full time and a further 4 in 10 work part time. There are nearly 2 million (17.6%) children living in 'workless households'.

Parents are now expected to combine caring with paid work. There is a contradiction here in that the traditional discourse of motherhood suggests that the 'best' parenting is carried out by a mother at home, whereas the Government's 'Welfare to Work' policies are encouraging single parents into the workplace.

Where there is no worker as a role model in a household, there can be concerns that the children will not acquire the 'work ethic' and could face the possibility of long-term social exclusion associated with a life on benefits. Rhetoric from both the Government and in the media tends to demonise such families as being unworthy welfare recipients.

Greater geographical mobility has led to many parents not having their extended family available for assistance. On the other hand, grandparents have

become a significant source of childcare for many working parents. Isolated parents, particularly single parents, are particularly susceptible to stress with adverse consequences for their children (DfES 2006a). Community projects, for example Surestart are a valuable way of building alternative networks of support.

10% of children come from minority ethnic groups, although there are wide regional variations.

The ethnic mix in a particular neighbourhood will impact upon the lives of individual children and families, whether a child is living in a multi-cultural environment or one heavily dominated by their own or another racial grouping. The issue of belonging, and particularly the concept of 'Britishness' presents major challenges for the 21st century (see chapter 10).

A qualitative study by Beishon et al. (1994) considered the lived experiences, values and attitudes of families of Asian and African-Caribbean origin. Asian families were generally more family-orientated within multi-generational families showing strong support for marriage and traditional family values. African-Caribbeans showed a more flexible approach to families, marriage, cohabitation and divorce, and their strong commitment to children and parenting was not necessarily related to the relationship between the parents.

A major demographic concern is the ageing population that will lead to a worsening of the ratio of workers to dependants and arguably a crisis in funding public services as more demands are made on a diminishing resource base (taxation revenue).

### **Economics**

The economic constraint largely determines the level of resources available to those delivering services. Since practitioners are seldom completely satisfied with the level of resourcing, the concept of rationing is needed to reconcile supply and demand, so that everybody in the organisation from the politicians and directorate who determine departmental budgets, through various levels in the hierarchy, down to front-line workers are involved in deciding who gets what and evaluating competing claims upon resources.

Underlying these resource inadequacies is a retreat from the Seebohm optimism (Seebohm Report 1968), at children's social services would be funded as a universal service. Funding has never been sufficient to deliver that, and instead a culture of rationing and cuts has dominated childcare social work. Central and local politicians tend to blame each other for the insufficiency of funding, but the major issue tends to get lost in the consideration of particular failings such as child deaths.

Resource levels are ultimately determined within the political process, by central government deciding upon the levels of taxation and public expenditure, through to local councillors deciding upon local budgets in the context

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of setting council tax levels. In reality local councils are severely constrained by complex central government rules in the amount of money they can raise through council tax, and hence their ability to improve local services. The private and voluntary sectors who are service providers within the mixed economy of care experience the knock-on effects of these decisions as budgets within the public sector largely determine funds available for commissioning and purchasing services elsewhere.

As well as these macro-economic factors affecting allocation of resources, we should also look at the economic factors that impact upon the individual household, especially the continuing high incidence of child poverty. Making sure that service users are receiving maximum benefits can make a real difference to the quality of a child's life. Sadly, specialist welfare rights units are now rare within social services, with most welfare rights advice being provided by the voluntary sector (often Citizens' Advice Bureaux). However, it remains good practice for children's service professionals to be able to offer benefits advice.

### **Organisational Factors Affecting Practice**

Although some childcare workers are employed directly by parents themselves, for example child minders, most are employed by an organisation with its own culture and ethos, who will also interact with a number of other organisations each with its own practices and beliefs.

An increasing proportion of services are now delivered through multi-agency and inter-professional work. The compatibility between various organisational cultures is a major area for debate in considering the effectiveness of partnership working, for example the compatibility of education and social service cultures (see chapter 8). Social workers are now employed in a variety of settings in multi-agency teams, and increasingly in the private and voluntary sectors. In the shift from being local government officers, working in relatively large service units, to a greater variety of employment opportunities, there is concern within children's care that there will be a marginalization of social workers.

State social work agencies, children's trusts and their adult counterparts are atypical of a number of other arrangements for employing professionals. First, they are bureaucracies with decisions being made on the basis of policies and procedures, arguably in an administrative rather than a professionally led context. Secondly, they are hierarchies, with typically six or more levels between the top and front-line workers. In contrast, solicitors and accountants, for example, are usually organised in small units under the legal framework for partnerships, allowing decisions to be taken more autonomously by professionals. Benefits resulting from these smaller organisational units include flexibility and the easy accommodation of individual variations and choices.

Children's services have tended to be service-led rather than needs-led, that is, provision is made according to what is available rather than what a service

user wants or a professional might feel they really need. Services have tended to be developed on the basis of the vision of officers or councillors rather than in consultation with service users.

Part of the new agenda for social work set out in 'Modernising Social Services' (Department of Health 1998), and for public services in general, is to listen to service users and to tailor services around individual need and choice. The direct payments scheme for adult services users and now extended to children with disabilities is a good example of this. Service users can manage their own care budget and, within the constraints of the budget and the care plan, purchase their own package of care.

An important characteristic of modern social work (and other public sector organisations) is managerialism, whereby practices similar to those used in private industry have been imported into the public services (Clarke et al. 1994). This means that policies are target-led and appraised according to performance indicators. Terms like 'quality' are now defined by accountants and managers rather than being based upon the more subjective views of service users and professionals. Managerialism also involves a shift in power from professionals to managers, with professional discretion deferring to quasi-administrative processes (form-filling).

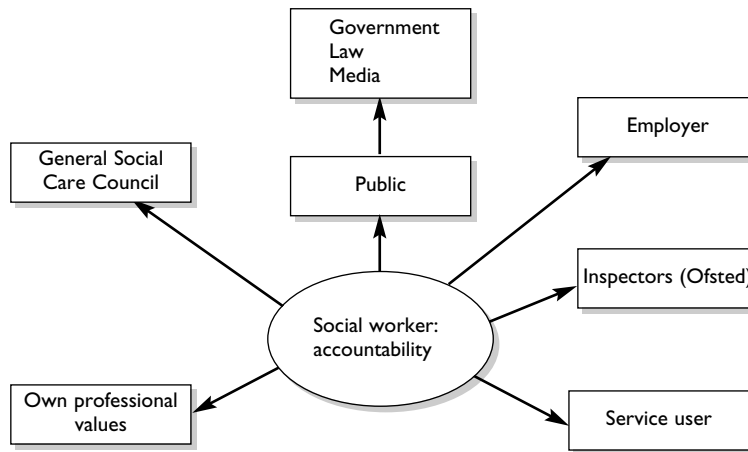
The 'Quality Protects' initiative which dates from 1998 and was funded for 5 years, set the managerial agenda for children's services. It was the main vehicle for delivering the aims in the broader paper 'Modernising Social Services' (Department of Health 1998) of effective protection, better quality care and improved life chances for children. Children's social services were also charged with providing the right targeted help to ensure that disadvantaged children and young people are able to take maximum advantage of universal services, in particular education and health.

The key elements of the 'Quality Protects' programme were:

- New national government objectives for children's services which for the first time set out clear outcome targets for children, for example to improve the education for 'looked after' children, and to increase the number of children adopted from care.
- Management action plans which set out how local councils intended to improve their services, and the production of league tables and star ratings to promote accountability and comparability.
- New systems were introduced, for example the 'looked after' children's system (LACS) and the national assessment framework designed to achieve quality, accountability and standardisation across the country.
- Partnership between and within central and local government and with the health service and the voluntary sector, leading to the establishment of some new services based upon the partnership model, notably Sure Start, the Children's Fund and Connexions.

There has also been a rise in inspections, based upon both value for money and performance. These two were combined under the remit of the Commission

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**Figure 1.4** Social work and accountability

for Social Care Inspection but all children's inspection work is now carried out by Ofsted.

The question of to whom a social worker is accountable is an interesting one. Despite the activities of the General Social Care Council (GSCC) which, through registration, the three-year degree and code of conduct, has sought to improve the status of social work as a profession, the autonomy of social workers as professionals has diminished. There is an uneasy tension between the accountability a social worker feels to their employing agency, to their professional values and to their service users.

The first cohorts of social workers who obtained a graduate qualification are now in practice. The significance of this is that social work as a profession has now come of age. As well as the new degree bringing increased credibility to the profession, it is now recognised that the initial qualification marks a beginning, not an end, to professional development through certificated study. The revised post-qualification framework will not only prepare social workers for more complex areas of practice, but also provide a route to a qualification at Master's level. This will undoubtedly increase the status and credibility of social work as a profession and bring the academic expectations in line with other caring professions that have taken this route, most notably teaching and nursing, and others to follow, for example youth work. As the children's workforce strategy evolves it is likely that the various professional qualifications for working with children will come together, at least in the provision of a common set of core knowledge and skills.

#### The Politics of Childcare Social Work

State social services are characterised by the presence and degree of political intervention, ranging from the influence of central government, the activities

of local councillors through to the interplay of competing interests that attempt to influence policy. The bedrock of a liberal democracy is the assumption that politicians and public servants should act in the best interests and reflect the views and values of the people (the public service ethic). Modern working practices can undermine this traditional value base (Banks 2004). Political processes are an attempt to reconcile competing values and views for the common good.

In central government there is now a single government department in control of all children's services, the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DfCSF) although responsibility for youth justice is shared with the Ministry of Justice. While it is welcome that one 'super-department' has control over all children's work, under the leadership of a secretary of state and a children's minister, the previous more fragmented system had the benefit that numerous ministers could legitimately represent children's interests, where everything must now be channelled through one super-department. It is possible that the voice of social care could be diminished as the department focuses upon the more costly and politically sensitive schools agenda.

Most children's social care functions are the responsibility of local authorities through children's trusts, although the role is shifting from direct service provision to a more strategic function of commissioning and co-ordinating provision by others.

Local councillors play a significant role in making local policy and holding senior officials to account, although the dynamics of the relationship between councillors and senior managers can undermine this. Managers are paid experts and councillors can find it difficult to gain sufficient good quality information to question their advice.

The political control of a council can markedly impact upon the role of elected members. Where a powerful political group has an overall majority in a Council plus the political will to make a difference, they can be a major force in driving policy change in a similar way to the Government in the House of Commons, which uses party discipline to ensure policies are adopted. However, many councils are often 'hung' (with no overall political majority) and are not highly politicised, which means that there is unlikely to be a clear vision for change from elected members. Reforms to local councils have aimed at increasing the accountability of officers to councillors, for example by the election of a full-time mayor or the use of cabinet-style arrangements, similar to Westminster.

It is important to consider the tension between local and national government, often referred to as the centralisation versus decentralisation debate. Many argue the case for local democracy in terms of accountability (to electors rather than bureaucrats) and local politicians being responsive to local needs. The argument for centralisation is often framed in terms of standardisation versus the 'postcode lottery', that it is fairer and more effective if services are provided consistently regardless of locality.

Local democracy has been undermined, by both voter apathy and the inability of local councillors to make a real difference by pursuing distinctive local policies due to the stranglehold of Westminster over local government finance and the prescriptive nature of legislation, regulations and national standards.

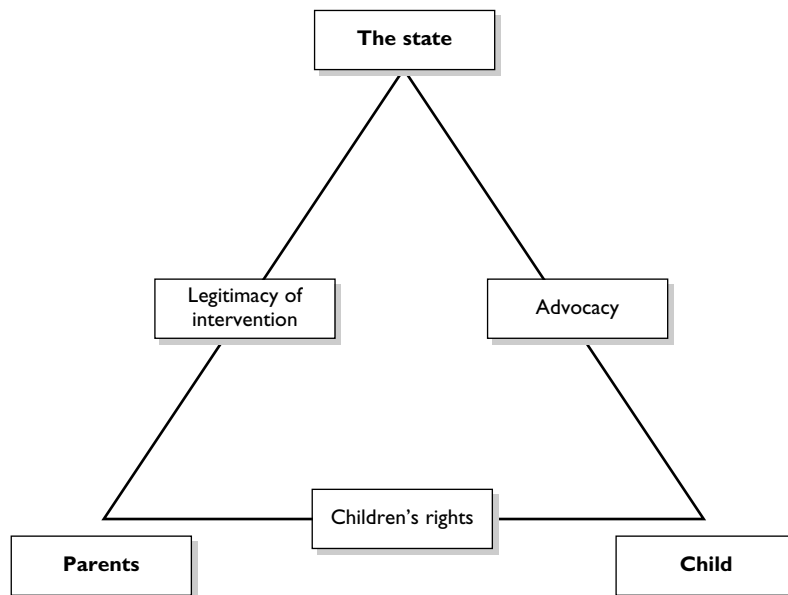
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Party politics has perhaps become unfashionable, with low turnout rates at elections and the general feeling that politicians cannot be trusted to make decisions in the best interests of the public. However, politics is at the very heart of the world of social care as elsewhere. It is about the mechanisms whereby we influence the things that impact upon us as workers and upon service users. Social care is not an apolitical activity: we can and should have an influence upon resource allocation decisions and the policy decisions that affect us. If we argue that our task is about caring and not politics, we are not maximising our potential benefit to service users through engagement in wider political questions.

A major political issue arises from consideration of the social constructions we place around childhood, parenting and families (discussed more fully in chapter 2); where the state should sit in the triangle of partnership between the state, parents and the child.

There are three issues here. First how legitimate is it for the state to intervene in the private world of the family? Secondly, what is the nature of intervention: should it be helpful or punitive, for example; based on welfare, protection or control? Thirdly, how much power children should have over their own lives?

Following from this is the children's rights approach, which aims to challenge the traditional assumption that intervention should be aimed at parents and suggests that children should be seen as the focus of children's services. Operationally this means that children should be consulted, listened to and provided with mechanisms to participate in their own care planning and overall



**Figure 1.5** Relationship between child, parents and state

service provision. Crucially, they should be empowered and assisted to complain when things go wrong (see chapter 2).

### **Ideology and Values**

Ideologies underlying childcare practice can be found at a number of levels from overarching value positions about the legitimacy and nature of intervention, to matters considered 'good practice' as a result of professional ideologies or research, for example the debate about residential care (see chapter 6). Each individual practitioner will also bring to their practice views and understandings that derive largely from their past experiences and their wider value systems, such as where they stand on the care-control continuum.

Decisions in childcare work are seldom clear-cut – everything is contested. Numerous ideological dilemmas will be raised in this book. A major one concerns the degree of intervention, for example, whether care should be seen as a last resort or one should be more interventionist, especially when the evidence is less than clear and it is difficult to evaluate risk. There is a tendency to err on the side of caution because, although one is damned if you do and damned if you don't when things go wrong, in the current blame culture a safety strategy is likely to be adopted. This can be referred to as *defensive practice*.

Attempts at defining the underlying values of children's work can be found in government documents or more significantly in the codes of practice of the various professional organisations. The General Teaching Council, the Nursing and Midwifery Council and the General Social Care Council have adopted a common code of values for work with children, recognising the multidisciplinary agenda. It has themes covering: respect and communication, partnership working with children and their families and inter-professional work with colleagues (General Social Care Council 2002; GTC 2006).

Fox-Harding (1997) outlines four value positions underlying childcare practice (although in practice elements overlap and converge) and which have a bearing on key principles in the Children Act 1989, in particular, the paramountcy of the welfare of the child and the recurrent theme of parental responsibility. These value positions demonstrate the highly contested nature of childcare work.

## **PRACTICE CONTEXT 1.4**

### **Value positions in childcare policy and practice**

#### **1 Laissez faire/minimalist**

- (a) Belief in a 'minimum state'.
- (b) Emphasis on the importance of undisturbed family life.
- (c) Importance of psychological bonding and protection of civil liberties.

#### **2 State paternalism/child protectionism**

- (a) Emphasis on parental duty to provide high standards of care.

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- (b) Emphasis on psychological (rather than biological) ties – but more inclined to disrupt those ties if parenting ‘unsatisfactory’. Much more benevolent view of ‘the state’.

**3 Birth family/parents rights**

- (a) Amalgamates interests of children and parents, seeing the child as part of family unit, emphasising the centrality/integrity of the ‘natural family’ and seeing the role of the state as supportive/preventive, rather than as a ‘transfer agency’ (taking power from parents).
- (b) Resists intrusive, coercive state intervention, but gives a more positive role to the state, for example, where support helps hold natural families together.
- (c) Biological and emotional bonds are interlinked, issues of material deprivation are emphasised. Where children are separated, links with parents (and siblings) should be maintained.

**4 Children’s rights/child liberation**

- (a) Child is seen as a person in their own right (autonomy, choices). This position is concerned with education, employment, etc., as well as social welfare.
- (b) There are different positions on an axis from ‘right to be cared for’ to ‘right to self-determination’. Some of the more extreme ‘self-determination’ positions tend not to see childhood as a developmental process, but as an oppressed state (oppressed by adults), for example, adults try to deny the sexuality of their children.

Source: adapted from Fox-Harding (1997)

**History of Children’s Work**

The extent to which history is of relevance to modern practice is contested. Learning from the past may ensure one does not make the same mistakes again. On the other hand, a slavish commitment to respecting how things have evolved from the past can stifle innovation and give inadequate recognition to changing circumstances.

Using history requires a consideration of the credibility of a historical account. While much history comes from documentary sources, which themselves usually have a background of contestation and struggle, much recent history, in particular that most relevant to modern social work, comes from qualitative evidence based upon personal accounts. Looking back to our earlier lives, we interpret the past in accordance with our own experiences and ideological stances, we evaluate it with the benefit of hindsight and in the light of modern knowledge. There is a tendency to see our past through rose-tinted spectacles: ‘It wasn’t like that in my day!’

Parton (2006) discusses the history of child welfare, arguing that the changes within a late modern society (discussed above) are radically altering the relationship between the child, the family, professionals and the state, moving from

the post-war period of 'organised modernity' (based on government welfare agencies) to one of 'extended liberal modernity', characterised by individuality and separateness rather than a fixed model of functional families and communities.

In this book history is used in areas where it provides an insight into current practices and dilemmas, for example in considering childcare placements (chapter 6), the failure to learn from the various childcare scandals (chapter 4) and youth justice where we need to reinvent the wheel (chapter 8). It is a sad reflection that many current policies fail to reflect lessons from the past.

### Children's Work in a Globalised and Postmodern World

Increasingly social work has to be viewed in a global or internationalist context. Fook (2002) discusses the influence of increasing technological communication and the constraints in promoting change in social work in a world dominated by global capitalism.

Payne (2005) debates whether social work is a modern or postmodern activity. While social work has its roots in a quasi-scientific discourse, and the trend towards evidence-based practice reinforces this commitment, it can be argued that new focuses upon individualism and changes in morality and in consumerist expectations of service diversity are taking the profession into a postmodern world (see chapter 10).

#### KEY POINTS

- A number of underlying issues have been identified in the structures within which children's work operates, for example whether profit and care mix.
- Interventions are constrained by contextual factors such as demography and resources.
- Social care professionals can impact on change to promote service improvements.
- Practice is carried out within value systems, for example a belief about the legitimacy of state intervention in the private world of the family.

#### RESOURCES

##### The context of childcare work

As this is such a broad area, it is impossible to suggest one or a few sources of further information. Textbooks aimed at first-year undergraduates in a chosen area would make a good starting point.

##### Social policy and social work

Adams, R. (2003), *Social Policy for Social Work*.

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### **Social work law**

Brammer, A. (2003), *Social Work Law*.

### **The media**

Galilee, J. (n.d.), *Literature Review on Media Representation of Social Work and Social Workers*.

### **Professional issues in social work**

General Social Care Council website

### **Inter-professional working**

Centre for the Advancement of Interprofessional Education (CAIPE) is a membership organisation promoting inter-professional practice across health and social care: [www.caipe.org.uk](http://www.caipe.org.uk).

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