

Speech to Move motion 66 – Family Justice System in Crisis – TUC 2018

President, congress, Yvonne Pattison, Napo, moving motion 66 the family justice system in crisis.

Napo's membership consists of mainly probation workers but we also represent those staff working in the family courts system. These members support families going through care proceedings at what can be one of the most stressful times of their lives. They are some of the most dedicated professionals I have seen and what is more, all too often they are the only support offered to parents and children when at their most vulnerable.

It may surprise congress to know that in the last year there has been a 13% increase in private law applications and a 6% increase in public law applications. This is on top of an increase in care applications of over 10% and a struggling recruitment and retention process within the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, known as CAFCASS. Workloads are now totally unmanageable and as such work related stress and illness is not surprisingly on an upward trajectory.

Our members are regularly submitting reports at 2am, as unregulated home working increases to cut costs even further. In addition we have seen numerous examples of staff reducing their working week to 3 or 4 days in order that they 'catch up' on their days off! This is totally unacceptable I'm sure you will agree.

So how did we get here? Chris Grayling... yes it's him again...and his hated legislation, Legal aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 or LASPO as its known, has stripped away legal aid for the majority of families. As such our members are facing further pressures from unrepresented families desperately seeking advice. Ironically the cost cutting exercise of LASPO has increased costs to CAFCASS as they try to manage these extra demands of advice and support.

Lack of resources and poverty have added an extra burden on an already crippled system. Our members are quite simply at breaking point and to make matters worse this is recognised by CAFCASS but they are helpless in trying to fix it. It's a pity the Archbishop had to leave so quickly as I was going to trouble him to offer a little of his divine intervention to assist in sorting this mess out, as I fear it is going to take some miracle to resolve as long as we have the current administration in charge. That aside, we must see investment from the Ministry of Justice and the Minister must address the issue instead of simply exploiting staff until they drop...

The 13th June saw the publication of the Care Crisis Review. It was commissioned in response to Sir James Munby's call to action in 2016 when he said:-

"We are facing a crisis and, truth be told, we have no clear strategy for meeting the crisis. What is to be done?"

The review looks at how to address the crisis, explores the contributory factors to the highest number of children in care since the Children's Act 1989 was enacted and care order applications reaching record levels in 2017.

The key findings are:-

- There is a sense of crisis felt by many young people, families and staff within the system
- Professionals are frustrated by working in a system that is so overstretched and overwhelmed and in which too often children and families do not get the direct help they need early enough to prevent difficulties escalating.
- There is a palpable sense of unease about how the lack of resources and poverty and deprivation are making it harder and harder for families and the system to cope.
- Contributors expressed strong concerns that a culture of blame, shame and fear has permeated the system and affected all those in it, including the children!

There is a 2 billion shortfall in Children's Social Care as a result of continued cuts that the government simply must make up if the system is to work effectively and fairly., Additionally ring fenced funds must be made available to local authorities to enable them to address the crisis locally.

Congress, this review, and this motion is not about avoiding care at all costs. For some children it is absolutely the right thing to provide safety and security. But this cannot be achieved in the current system while it is so overstretched.

The system must be properly funded,

Professionals must be properly resourced to do their job and

Children must be given all the support and resources they need to flourish...

Congress, I move