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## Getting started with the 1948 Children Act What do we learn?

**Roy Parker** reflects on the reform of children's services in the wake of the 1948 Children Act and the role of children's officers and children's committees charged with its implementation in the period 1948–1970. He examines the backgrounds of these officers, many of whom were women seen for the first time in senior positions, methods of recruitment and how the performance of officers and committees was assessed. He also discusses some of the problems they faced, such as how to shift care from residential establishments to foster homes, overloaded caseloads and substandard children's accommodation, and considers whether any lessons can be learned from the past.

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**Key words:** Children Act 1948, children's officers, early children's services reform

*Having recently read Judith Niechcial's biography of Lucy Faithfull I became curious about others of her generation who also entered the newly constructed children's services at the senior level in the wake of the Children Act of 1948. The new children's officers whom the local authorities were obliged to appoint, together with their committees, were expected to implement the substantial reforms that the Act required. How did they get started and what difficulties did they have to confront? What qualities did they require and how successful were they? Are there still conclusions to be drawn about such sweeping reforms that are useful in today's world of regular administrative upheavals?*

*Of course, Lucy Faithfull (later Baroness Faithfull) was not one of these initial appointees but she was, at the time, one of the Home Office inspectors who, with their colleagues, endeavoured to oversee and guide what was happening at the local level. However, she did move to become the children's officer for Oxford city in 1958. In tracing her career Niechcial has provided us with a window onto the broad sweep of events that unfolded in the children's service after 1948 and, indeed, up to Lucy's death in 1996.*

*The reader will see that what follows has benefited from several of Bob Holman's publications and also from Kenneth Brill's unpublished thesis that he completed just before his death in 1991. My thanks to them both.*

### **A starting point**

The 1948 Children Act established separate children's committees in all county councils and county borough councils in Great Britain. These were to be responsible for a more integrated service for children in need of care and for a service that was to raise the standard of the care that was provided. Children's officers were to be appointed to see these reforms realised and were to have no other responsibilities. We shall come to the question of how standards were to be raised later, but first it is important to appreciate the scale of the integration that was put in train because it was this that presented the children's officers with their initial practical and political challenges.

Before 1948 the public care of children deprived of a 'normal' home life was divided locally between the public assistance committees, education and public health departments. The first of these were responsible for administering the Poor Law, one part of which concerned the 'relief' of children through their admission to care on a voluntary basis, although it was possible later, in certain circumstances, for the local authority to assume the rights and duties of parents. The reasons for such children's initial admission included parental incapacity, desertion, orphanhood and such like. In 1946 there were 33,000 of them in care in England and Wales, of whom just 15 per cent were boarded out (Curtis, 1946, p 12). In Scotland there were 7,000, 76 per cent in foster homes (Clyde, 1946, p 7).

Local education departments became

involved when it was considered necessary for a court to make a 'fit person order' removing a child from home in order to ensure their adequate care or protection. The 'fit person', almost always the local authority, then assumed the powers and duties of the parents until the child was 18 or until the order was discharged. However, the 1933 Children and Young Persons Act specified that a local authority should discharge these responsibilities through its education committee; they could not be exercised by a public assistance committee.<sup>1</sup> It was because of this that, before 1948, there were staff in education departments engaged in the supervision of committed children, whether they were placed in foster homes or in residential care. In England and Wales in 1945 about 10,000 children were subject to these fit person orders, 60 per cent of whom were boarded out (Curtis, 1946, p 18). In Scotland there were 1,500, 72 per cent with foster parents (Clyde, 1946, p 40).

The third arm of local government that was concerned with children's services prior to 1948 was public health. These departments were responsible for supervising (usually through their health visitors) those children who were subject to the child life protection provisions of various public health acts. Children under nine years of age who were not in care but who were 'taken for reward' in private foster homes, in nurseries run for profit, in a few unregistered voluntary homes or who were placed privately for adoption had to be visited and their well-being checked. In 1944, 14,200 children fell into these categories.<sup>2</sup> However, the 1948 Act raised the age below which such children had to be visited to 15, and

18 if they remained in education. This immediately boosted the number to 34,800, an increase of 41 per cent; but this now included 25,000 children who were in independent boarding schools (Home Office, 1951, p 36). However, in 1954 the Chancery Court ruled that these 'boarders' were not 'living apart' from their parents and therefore were not subject to the child life protection legislation.<sup>3</sup> Children's officers must have breathed a sigh of relief.

Thus, the new children's officers became responsible for a disparate body of children transferred from three different departments operating different systems, keeping different records and with different policies.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, as the Curtis Committee pointed out, there had been a history of tension between them and inadequate co-ordination (Curtis, 1946, p 36). There had also been a history of acrimonious relations between the three central government departments involved; namely, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and the Home Office. In the negotiations prior to the 1948 Act each had contended for the overall control of children's services, a contest eventually won by the Home Office<sup>5</sup> (see Parker, 1983).

### **The lucky dip**

The report of the Curtis Committee had placed considerable importance on the need for each county and county borough council to appoint a separate children's committee but also for there to be a children's officer answerable to it. Indeed, Curtis maintained that in the new organisation that was recommended these chief officers would be 'its pivot'

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<sup>1</sup> This is made clear in section 96(1) of the Children and Young Persons Act, 1933.

<sup>2</sup> In Scotland, however, it was the poor law authorities that were responsible for supervising children subject to the Child Life Protection legislation.

<sup>3</sup> See *Wallbridge and Another v Dorset County Council* 2 W.L.R. 1068 (1954). However, the law was not actually changed until the Children Act of 1958.

<sup>4</sup> The new children's committees did not become responsible for approved schools or remand homes. These remained controlled by their management committees and by the Home Office centrally.

<sup>5</sup> The Home Office was especially keen to retain and acquire responsibility for children's services because these were regarded as important for softening the public image of its otherwise predominant responsibilities for matters associated with law and order.

(Curtis, 1946, p 146). Yet it went further, offering a rather detailed specification of the qualities that were required in such officers who, it expected, were likely to be women. They would need to have 'marked administrative capacity', be able to work well with their committees, have a good grasp of local government procedures and have 'enough faith and enthusiasm to try methods old and new' (Curtis, 1946, p 148). Ideally, these paragons would also be graduates with a social science diploma and have had experience of work with children. It needs to be borne in mind, however, that the parallel committee of inquiry in Scotland, led by Lord Clyde, although largely mirroring the recommendations of Curtis, made no suggestions whatsoever about the qualities that were to be sought in the new children's officers;<sup>6</sup> nor did the subsequent Act or the accompanying circular (Home Office Circular No. 160/1948).

Although the Curtis requirements may have been desirable it was always going to be difficult to find enough candidates who fulfilled them. Indeed, in its 1951 report of the work of its children's department the Home Office acknowledged that it was 'unrealistic to suggest that all children's officers appointed possessed . . . the high qualities specified by the [Curtis] . . . Committee' (Home Office, 1951, p 22). In the first place there were 129 children's authorities in England, 17 in Wales and 55 in Scotland and although two or more could jointly appoint a children's officer, few did. Where were so many competent officials to be found over a matter of months? A few authorities (such as Essex) had made their appointments earlier, foreseeing the competition that was likely to

arise. Many moved quickly after the 'appointed day' but others did not, sometimes from indecision, sometimes from a lack of suitable candidates, sometimes because of unresolved issues within the authority and sometimes because of differences with the Home Office, whose Secretary of State had to be consulted about all proposed appointments and who was able to veto those not considered to be suitable.

Some years later, the Home Office characterised these initial appointments as 'a lucky dip' that had influenced the success or otherwise of the new services (*Report of the Royal Commission on Local Government in England, 1966-69*, 1969, p 237). So who, in the event, was appointed? Although the information is limited we do have two sources upon which to call. In 1963 Clare Winnicott compiled details of the first 146 appointees in England and Wales. These showed that overall there were 93 women (64%) and 53 (36%) men. Later, Kenneth Brill assembled somewhat fuller details about 119 of those appointed.<sup>7</sup> He found almost the same division between women and men but was able to add that in the counties 79 per cent of those appointed were women whereas in the boroughs it was 63 per cent (Brill, 1991, p 47).

Both our sources provided information about the children's officers' previous occupations. Winnicott showed that in the 83 county boroughs 67 per cent of those appointed came from education departments and the rest from broadly defined 'social work'. By contrast, in the counties she classed 71 per cent as previously employed in social work and with almost all the rest coming from education. Brill did not give these

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<sup>6</sup> John Murphy (1992) argues in his *British Social Services: The Scottish dimension* that the absence of any mention of the qualities needed in a children's officer in the Clyde report was a major weakness that 'was to prove adverse to the establishment of adequate children's departments' in Scotland in the early years (p 31). But this seems too simple an explanation: other factors were at work as well, not least the stronger opposition to the idea of separate children's departments in Scotland than in England and Wales.

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately Brill gave no information about the source of this material but he had been Children's Officer in Croydon and in Devon and the long-serving secretary of the Association of Children's Officers.

details separately for the boroughs and the counties. Overall, however, he classified 41 per cent as having been 'social workers' and 37 per cent as having been drawn from 'education'. He allocated the rest to miscellaneous backgrounds, although hardly any had anything to do with health; for instance, only one assistant medical officer of health was appointed and one health visitor (Brill, 1991, pp 45–6). This may seem surprising but, as Brill points out, the salaries being offered to the children's officers were low compared with those being paid in the health field or, indeed, elsewhere in local government (p 55).

As we have seen, those who had been employed in education would have been mainly concerned with the placement and supervision of children committed to their departments on fit person orders. Some would have been involved in issues of school attendance and some with special education. Only two had been teachers. The 'social workers' were a much more mixed bag, but almost all came from the voluntary sector. Few were professionally qualified (Brill, 1991, p 58) and few had any experience of working in local government. Whereas Curtis had recommended that most of those appointed should be graduates, in the event only 37 per cent were and fewer still combined this with a social science diploma (Brill, 1991, p 48). Of course, many university careers had been forestalled or cut short by the war, with the result that there were far fewer graduates than might have been expected. On the other hand, many who were appointed had been in the armed forces during the war or workers in UN relief and rehabilitation organisations, people accustomed to bearing a measure of responsibility, often at a young age. In addition, some of the women who became children's officers had been concerned with the wartime fostering of evacuees.

### **Women in higher places**

One claim made about the consequences of the 1948 reforms in children's services has been that they opened the

way for able women to occupy senior posts in local government. Certainly, some of them proved to be exceptional and it has tended to be their names that are remembered and for whom obituaries have been written: women like Joan Cooper in East Sussex who rose to be the Chief Inspector at the Home Office and then Director of the Social Work Service at the Department of Health (see Wedge, 2003; Jackson, 2008). However, it should not be overlooked that some very able men were appointed as well and that even in the early years after 1948 a good deal of reshuffling took place. In Middlesex, for example, the children's officer (Mr Ainscow) moved almost at once to the London County Council as its chief officer, creating an interregnum before another appointment was made (National Archives, PRO, MH 102/1644).

Nonetheless, the introduction of women into chief officer posts in local government was new and significant. For example, in the 1938 edition of the *Municipal Yearbook* no women were listed as occupying the posts of county or town clerk, medical officer of health, director of education, housing manager or chief welfare officer anywhere in Great Britain. The only female chief officers were five librarians, three museum curators and a registrar of births and deaths. However, there was a sprinkling of deputies, particularly in health and education. Of course, it was up to each authority to decide whether certain posts were accorded the title of 'chief officer', but it is reasonable to conclude that before the war there were no women in the top positions of local government. However, in one fell swoop the Children Act brought in around 125 (throughout Great Britain) and, it should be noted, there were now more women in the inspectorate of the children's department of the Home Office. For example, whereas in 1946 nine of these 17 inspectors were women by 1954 there were 31, but out of a total of 74. Even so, they now occupied more senior posts: one (Miss Rosling, who had been joint secretary of the Curtis Committee)

was an assistant secretary, one the chief inspector (Miss Scorrer), one the senior medical inspector, another the supervising inspector together with seven Grade 1 inspectors, one of whom was Lucy Faithfull. Previously no women had occupied the rather fewer senior positions in what was then called the Home Office Children's Branch (*British Imperial Calendar and Civil List*, 1946 and 1954). Inspectors in that branch had been concerned chiefly with approved schools, remand homes and hundreds of voluntary children's homes.<sup>8</sup>

It is interesting to bring the story forward. In 1970, the last year of separate children's departments, the proportion of children's officers who were women had fallen to 46 per cent (England and Wales) from its level of 66 per cent at the beginning (Brill, 1991, p 47). However, by 2011 52 per cent of the directors of children's services were women and this virtual parity now exists irrespective of the type of authority (Association of Directors of Children's Services, 2011).

### **Getting established**

By 1949 it might have been expected that that year's *Municipal Yearbook* would see children's officers numbered among the chief officers; but they appear in only 38 of the authorities' entries, none of which was Scottish. The significance of so many omissions should not be overlooked, for they offer a glimpse of the difficulty that many of the new children's officers had in establishing themselves in the top tier of their local authorities and in having the services for children for which they were responsible given the priority that was required.

What, then, were the principal difficulties that challenged those who were to lead the newly created children's services? Inevitably, as we have seen on many occasions since, administrative reform is not trouble free. It causes upheavals. Establishing a new service is

a demanding task at the best of times, but for the new children's officers there were problems over and above those generally associated with rearranging who does what, changing priorities and introducing new policies.

In the first place there were the consequences of the war. There were the disruptions to family life, the effects of which were still being felt in 1948. Services had been run down. Shortages abounded. Austerity was the order of the day. In these conditions competition for almost all resources was intense. If they were to win a sufficient share to enable standards to be raised, children's officers needed both determination and political skill. Some rose to the occasion, others struggled. Nevertheless, the challenges were by no means the same everywhere. The standard of the children's services that were inherited varied considerably, as did information about them. Furthermore, the contexts within which problems had to be confronted were different from place to place. There were, for example, eight authorities in England and Wales with populations of over a million (all of which appointed men), while at the other extreme 37 had populations of less than 50,000; and even in between there was a wide variation. Similarly, 12 authorities had more than 1,000 children in care at the time (accounting for 41% of the total) but 23 had fewer than 100 (National Archives, PRO, HO 414/1). In Scotland, only Glasgow had more than 1,000 children in care while 18 authorities had fewer than 50, doubtless the reason why many of them felt that a separate appointment was unnecessary (Scottish Home Department, 1958). What was demanded of a children's officer in a large authority was not the same as what was asked of them in a small one, or in a sprawling county rather than a compact urban area; and these differences were often accompanied by different political cultures.

Nonetheless, in whatever kind of

<sup>8</sup> Until the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 (section 94) there was no full record of the number of these institutions. Some had been inspected by the Ministry of Health or Board of Education, but most (estimated to be more than 1,000) were under no form of inspection (Home Office, 1938, pp 103–9).

authority, children's services could only prosper once their standing had been established. Several factors made this more difficult for the first children's officers. One, as we have seen, was that the majority of them were women who found themselves in organisations that were unaccustomed to having women in senior positions: as Dorothy Watkins (children's officer in Cornwall) rather forcefully put it 'the prospect of a woman chief officer appalled most local authorities' (Watkins, 1993, p 126). Moreover, many of these women were young (Barbara Kahan in Dudley and Frances Drake in Northamptonshire were both 28 when appointed (Holman, 1998, pp 33 and 53)) and, as we have seen, many had no experience of working in local government. Moreover, their 'departments' were small by comparison with other arms of local government; they commanded few resources and were paid relatively low salaries (and lower still than their male counterparts). It was not surprising, therefore, that they found themselves occupying the lower ranks of the council hierarchy.

However, these were not the only matters that made it difficult to gain an acceptance of the status of the children's services and of those associated with them. Although often referred to as children's departments, the 1948 Act did not make this a requirement. A separate department was not obligatory and in some areas, as in Kent for example, the children's officers found themselves located, at least for a time, in the clerk's department and regarded as one of its 'sections'. Then there were the ever-important symbols of status, particularly accommodation and whether or not the new posts warranted the use of a local authority car. In the early post-war years accommodation was at a premium and fitting in one more enterprise posed real problems. By and large, children's officers had to make do with what they were handed and then fight for something better. Even so, there were some outlandish examples. Brill (1993, p 59) recounts that in one case the new appointee was given a chair and a table

in the macebearer's office and Watkins (1993, p 129) recalls how her first accommodation was a hut in the County Hall car park.

One important difference between the authorities in which the new officers found themselves was the composition and leadership of the new children's committees. Some included members who understood and were sympathetic to what had to be done in order to improve children's services and who were in a position to influence the authority as a whole. Other committees were less supportive, while some children's officers, unfamiliar with working to an elected committee, failed to use them to best advantage. Furthermore, there were committees that contained disgruntled members because they disliked the reforms. For example, Brill (1993, p 54) makes the point that 'on the whole the councillors and officers connected with education thought that the child care service could well be done by the education service'. In some cases a local authority's wish to make the director of education or the chief welfare officer responsible for the new children's services (alongside their other responsibilities) had been blocked by the Home Office, creating a simmering discontent that could dog the efforts of the 'imposed' children's officer who would not necessarily have known of this history before they were appointed (Wedge, 2011). Hence, as in all administrative reform, there were elements of dissatisfaction, if not outright opposition, with which children's officers had to contend, albeit that they were not as prevalent everywhere.

As well as all of this there was the question of the staff who were made available. In some places there were none. In others some officers who had been involved in boarding out were moved across from education or public assistance departments and where this happened it could be a matter of rather delicate negotiation, both during the transfer and after. In Berkshire the Home Office inspector reported that the children's officer (Miss Summerhayes) could

not 'deal with' three such women who were accustomed to working independently of any authority and whose records they kept close to themselves (National Archives, PRO, MH 102/1642). Likewise, children's officers inherited staff in residential homes, many of whom were fearful of what the changes might portend. Some were unsatisfactory but difficult to dismiss because of their long service, because of the support of elected members or because the children's officer could not face the ensuing confrontation. And, in any case, it was difficult to find good enough replacements.

However, it was not only these staffing problems that had to be faced but also, in many places, a dearth of secretarial help. Some children's officers began with none. Yet the establishment of the new organisation called for much assistance of this kind. As we have seen, cases were inherited from other departments, together with all the paper work that went with them, some of which, the inspectors reported, was not up to date, was missing or was in a chaotic state. All this had to be sorted out. Without adequate help children's officers could find themselves having to do things that were certainly not what might have been expected. Many worked long hours in order to find out what had to be done and then coped with it. Furthermore, it needs to be remembered that much was, or had to be, handwritten and that typing (together with making corrections and carbon copies) was often a laborious and time-consuming business.

Given the circumstances surrounding the newness and standing of the children's officers in the early years, as well as the fact that many had no experience of working in local government, it is not difficult to imagine that they were liable to feel rather isolated, if not at sea. They needed both support and advice. There were several possible sources but five were most common.

In 1949 the Association of Children's Officers (ACO) was formed in order to provide a network within which members could find mutual support, reassurance and information. From the start, a

bulletin (of which Kenneth Brill was editor for many years) was distributed ten times a year. Conferences and meetings were held, both nationally and regionally; a sub-committee was established to give advice on legal matters; working groups were set up, and evidence submitted to various inquiries. Indeed, the Association came to exercise considerably more political influence than might have been expected, often with the aid of the Home Office inspectorate.

Some children's officers obtained help and advice from the Home Office inspectorate directly; but this could not be available on a day-to-day basis, and much depended on the relationship that was established between particular individuals. In some cases this was warm and collaborative; in others it was decidedly frosty (National Archives, PRO, MH 102/1644). In the larger authorities children's officers may also have been able to call upon experienced staff who had been transferred from other departments for advice. However, this again depended upon the kinds of relationships that emerged and, of course, these could go either way.

This was equally true of the potential allies who might have been available elsewhere in the authority, particularly directors of education, medical officers of health, chief welfare officers, chief constables, clerks or treasurers. However, they could be indifferent or frankly obstructive if they were unsympathetic to the new arrangements. For example, in Bob Holman's interview with Rosalie Treece (formerly Spence), who became children's officer in Nottinghamshire in 1948, she explained that 'the medical officer of health, the director of education and the public assistance people didn't want to give up any of their responsibilities, particularly to a woman chief officer', adding that she 'was 34, very young' (Holman, 1998, p 88). But there were certainly exceptions. In her first report, published in 1950, Elizabeth Harvie, the children's officer in Kent, expressed her 'sincere thanks' for the 'generous co-operation' that she had

received from the former public assistance officer, from the county education officer and from the medical officer of health (Kent County Council, 1950, p 7). It might be noted that the first of these was John Moss who had been a member of the Curtis committee and a willing signatory. Likewise, several children's officers paid tribute to the support that they had received from the clerks of their authorities, sometimes because they had been placed in those departments as one of their 'sections' and, in a sense, sheltered within a powerful department of local government.

Children's officers certainly depended upon their committees for the support without which little progress could be made. Although the pattern was undoubtedly uneven, the available evidence suggests that committees were generally sympathetic to what needed to be done. In Glamorgan, for example, Beti Jones recounted that as children's officer she 'could not have had a better authority' and this she attributed to her committee members having 'a warm instinct towards children and a passion to see that their potential was fulfilled' (Holman, 1998, p 49). However, much turned on who was selected to serve on these committees. For example, in his study of the Manchester children's department Bob Holman found that Ian Brown, the children's officer, considered himself fortunate in that the woman who first chaired his committee was a strong personality, with enough allies, to 'put the children's department on the map . . .'. (1996, p 53). But Brown was doubly fortunate in that he also had the support of Philip Dingle, the town clerk, who became one of the first members of the central Advisory Council on Child Care. He probably also had the advantage of having worked for Manchester as an assistant education officer and of being, at 45, one of the older children's officers appointed after 1948. The Manchester case exemplifies the fact

that although single sources of support, such as the committees, were important, even more important was the existence of several such sources and, of course, the ability to nurture them and draw upon them with skill and discrimination.

Even so, it was, first and foremost, the committees (and sub-committees) with which the new officers had to establish a working relationship. Sometimes there were members who entertained old poor law attitudes about the limits that should be placed on what was done for children in care, attitudes that could frustrate efforts to secure more humanising conditions in homes or greater flexibility for what foster parents could provide. There were also committees (particularly sub-committees) that were reluctant to allow children's officers sufficient discretion on day-to-day matters or which became over-involved in the running of particular homes. In time, however, these issues began to be ironed out as the membership of committees changed and as mutual confidence was established; but much still turned on how well children's officers played their hand.

As we saw, the Home Office later termed the choice of children's officers as something of a 'lucky dip', but this could equally well have been said of the authorities to which they were appointed. Only gradually did many of them discover how lucky or unlucky they had been, the most able building on their luck or working to overcome their lack of it. Some were able, some very able, but others were not and it is to these distinctions that we now turn.

### **Assessing performance**

With so many children's officers it is, of course, impossible to make an overall assessment of their ability, even more so after over 60 years. Nonetheless, Brill was able to examine 97 of the assessments of the officers' performance made by the Home Office at the time.<sup>9</sup> These were grouped into five categories. Ten

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<sup>9</sup> Again, it is frustrating that Brill provided no information about where these records are to be found. My search in the Public Record Office was unable to locate them there. However, the Home Office did keep a 'personal file' on all children's officers, but where this is or whether it still exists I do not know.

per cent were classed as very good; 40 per cent as good; 26 per cent as satisfactory; 16 per cent as less than satisfactory, and seven per cent as poor (Brill, 1993, p 52). In the 12 largest authorities nine children's officers were reckoned to be less than satisfactory (p 118). There was no difference between the counties and the county boroughs or between those who held an academic qualification and those who did not (p 124). The one in four officers who were considered below average probably reflected the fact that in 1948 there were just not enough good applicants to go round. Furthermore, although the Home Office could veto some appointments that were considered unsuitable there was no comparable power for them to have a children's officer dismissed. For example, in Berkshire the Home Office inspector considered the children's officer 'weak', unable to get her department organised, 'dilatatory in . . . instituting the necessary statutory records' and 'incapable of planning' and although comments like these continued to be recorded there was no replacement (National Archives, PRO, MH 102/1642).

Twenty years after the 'appointed day', the Home Office submitted evidence to the Royal Commission on Local Government in which it set out another assessment of 121 children's departments (not quite the same as the children's officers). Nine per cent were considered to be 'very good'; 25 per cent 'good'; 39 per cent 'acceptable'; 22 per cent 'below acceptable'; and eight per cent 'weak' (*Report of Royal Commission on Local Government in England, 1966-69*, 1969, p 238). Compared with the earlier figures this would suggest some deterioration, although the assessments may have become more rigorous and the challenges more demanding.

Along with their assessments of the children's officers in the early 50s the Home Office inspectors also gave their views about the children's committees. Twenty-three per cent were considered to be good or very good, 43 per cent satisfactory and 34 per cent less than

satisfactory, but only three per cent were regarded as 'weak' (Brill, 1993, p 101). Thus, rather more committees were ranked below the middle point than the children's officers. What we don't know is how the one related to the other, which would have been interesting – as would the answer to the same question today. For example, although we know that there was a preponderance of women councillors on children's committees we do not know how that affected, if at all, the manner in which these committees worked with their children's officers, whether men or women.

### **Improving the services**

This account of the appointment of the first children's officers and the establishment of a reformed children's service might have been expected to have begun with an overview of the problems that had to be tackled in these services, but that was not its main purpose. Nevertheless, the performance of these officers cannot be considered separately from the service problems that they faced. Let us look at four of the most significant.

If improvements were to be made the children's officers had to recruit more trained staff. Yet, as the Home Office pointed out in 1951, 'provision for training was . . . totally inadequate' (p 33). Indeed, prior to 1948 there was no national qualification in child care and, as a matter of urgency, the Central Training Council in Child Care was established in 1947 in order to promote training courses for boarding-out officers and residential care staff. By 1949 there were six rather prestigious courses for the former based in universities and, by 1950, 19 for the latter organised by local authorities; but the output was small. Two hundred and sixteen students had qualified as boarding-out officers by 1950, only four of whom were men (Home Office, 1951, para 134, p 34). By the same year, 355 students had successfully completed residential care courses, 55 of whom were men (p 35). It took many years, therefore, before there was anything like

an adequate supply. Even by 1964 (the first survey) only 27 per cent of the field staff of English and Welsh children's departments were recognised as qualified by the Home Office and a comparable figure for residential staff still awaited publication (Parker, 1990, p 33). Furthermore, it was the best-led departments which tended to attract the qualified staff so that their distribution became somewhat skewed.

A second major problem was how to shift care from residential establishments to foster homes. That, again, depended on what field staff could be recruited. However, the starting point was different in different authorities. Although the overall rate of boarding out in England and Wales, in 1949, was 35 per cent, among the different authorities it ranged from 68 per cent to nine per cent (Home Office, 1951, p 12). In Scotland rates were already high, averaging 61 per cent, and remained at that level throughout the 50s (Scottish Home Department, 1958). Nonetheless, high proportions did not necessarily mean that there were no problems. In Scotland, for example, many children were placed with families in remote areas of the Highlands and Islands and rarely visited. In England and Wales, in 1949, a quarter of the children in foster homes had been placed in another authority's area. Apart from everything else this could create problems of co-ordination, a shortcoming tragically exemplified by the death of Dennis O'Neill from Newport in his foster home in rural Shropshire in 1945 (Monckton, 1945). It could not be assumed, therefore, that inheriting a high rate of boarding out meant that all was well; and many foster homes meant many visits, making it that much more difficult to find new ones.

Caseloads were heavy. In an undated but early report to her committee, the Essex children's officer (Miss Wansbrough-Jones) explained that her ten visitors had to supervise the existing foster homes, find new ones, investigate all applications, visit the homes of children in care in order to see if they could return and also attend juvenile

courts. On top of these demands there were the children in notified private foster homes to be visited (National Archives, PRO, MH 102/1644).

As well as the development and improvement of foster care many children's officers were faced with a poor legacy of residential care. Even by 1953 there were some 15,000 children living in large local authority homes in England and Wales and another 6,000 who had been placed in voluntary homes. Perhaps of greatest concern were the residential nurseries, in which, in 1949, some 5,000 babies and infants were being looked after (National Archives, PRO, HO 414/1). Some of these were still located in former Poor Law institutions. Boarding out was arranged for some and a few were adopted, but the other solution was the creation of more separate residential nurseries. Between the appointed day in 1948 and February 1951, 49 new nurseries were provided but 74 still remained in the old institutions (Home Office, 1951, p 19).

Thus, many children's officers had to decide how best they could deal with deplorable institutional legacies and then win the resources to do what was needed. This was a challenge. As well as the staffing issue the upgrading of residential establishments had to compete for building materials and labour and win the co-operation of the local authority's hard-pressed architect's department while at the same time satisfying the Home Office's exacting requirements and those of fire officers.

These various problems in improving the services had to be grappled with at the same time as the number of children in care was rising rapidly. In England and Wales at the end of November 1949 the figure stood at 55,255, but by the same month in 1952 it had grown to 64,682. That was an increase of 17 per cent (Home Office, 1951, p 148; 1953, p 3). There is, of course, the interesting question of why this happened. Among the reasons offered have been the aftermath of war and evacuation, much homelessness and a greater willingness

on the part of other agencies to refer children to the new children's departments now that there was no longer an association with the Poor Law. Certainly, there were more and more referrals but not always the time to decide which of them did *not* warrant admission. Whatever the reasons these rising numbers undoubtedly exacerbated the many other problems that had to be faced.

### **Lessons?**

A frequent reaction to an historical exploration is to ask what lessons can be learned. Sometimes there are such lessons and sometimes there are not. Sometimes what a study tells us is glaringly obvious and sometimes remarkably surprising. In this account of the early days of the 1948 Children Act there is a mixture. Let me pick out a few conclusions that may still be worth bearing in mind today. Most are about the process of administrative reform.

As remarked earlier, such reforms create upheavals, the consequences of which are not always foreseen and therefore tend to create new problems. In the first place, the inauguration of substantial changes on an 'appointed day' and without much preparation takes time to 'settle', particularly when they are accompanied by major shifts in policy. One of the obvious reasons is that even when the changes are advocated on the grounds of economy there are always unforeseen costs. For example, foster care was to be advanced because it was considered better for the children but also because the unit costs were less than residential care. There was, it seemed, the marvellous coincidence that what was best was also the cheapest. Yet in order to develop foster care children's officers needed the necessary staff as well as a range of other resources that increased expenditures, which were not reflected in the conventional way of determining costs. Furthermore, as we have seen, reforms are liable to increase demand on services or, at least, to alter its pattern; and this is not always predictable.

Administrative systems generate sets of interests and when these systems are

changed there are both winners and losers. Certainly, many children in care were to benefit from the creation of the children's departments and, organisationally, the cause of professional women took a step forward. On the other hand, education and public health departments saw their influence being reduced. Likewise, in a number of areas children's officers had to contend with a measure of discontent among the heads of the homes that they had inherited, some of whom saw their status and autonomy threatened. Although children's committees were not responsible for the approved schools, they were responsible for any children in care who had been placed in them and some children's officers, such as Barbara Kahan, were particularly anxious to avoid this. For both reasons negotiations with the often-powerful heads of these institutions could be difficult. And then there were the voluntary children's organisations, which foresaw that much of their work would come to be taken over by the local authorities and were understandably apprehensive. In 1949 there were still 11 per cent of the children in local authority care who were being looked after by these organisations (Home Office, 1951, p 148). On all these counts the new heads of children's departments had to deal with fears and disaffections, both within their authorities and beyond, disaffections that were likely to make essential collaboration that much more hazardous. Such problems are the common accompaniment of structural reform, but their extent and consequences are not always evident beforehand. Yet their impact will affect the subsequent course of events. It is sensible, therefore, to assess what they might be and to consider how their perverse effects might be offset, not least by negotiation before rather than after the event.

All this calls for considerable sagacity on the part of those charged with the implementation of significant reforms, and that was undoubtedly true in 1948: hence the importance of these early appointments. However, how was this to

be determined by appointing committees and in different local contexts? In any case, was it a single attribute? As Brill (1993) pointed out, the children's officers might be full of passion and determination but be sadly lacking in political skill. Yet the one without the others will rarely be enough. So, what is the nature of political skill? It varies, but rests upon the possession of vision combined with information and the associated foresight; that is to say, the ability to understand the terrain, to appreciate the character of the obstacles ahead and the pattern of potential alliances. Yet, even then, the manner in which this skill is exercised will vary. There is a good example in Judith Niechcial's biography of Lucy Faithfull in which she contrasts Lucy's 'style' as children's officer in Oxford city with that of her neighbour, Barbara Kahan, in the surrounding county. Barbara, she writes: 'made a conscious decision to be a "battleaxe" rather than a "nice girl" . . . Lucy used quite other tactics. She was the "nice girl" personified, who used her charm, diplomacy and "people skills" to get her way' (Niechcial, 2010, pp 85–6).

Both seem to have been successful although working in somewhat different settings. The lesson might be that appointing committees have to know what will be needed and, for that, they too have to have good local information together with a vision of the future. Only then, and only with difficulty, will they be able to pick the right candidate. In 1948 it was understandable that some committees did not understand what was going to be wanted of their new chief officers and what might have to be faced in the years to come, most notably the

emergence of child abuse as a prominent issue and the quest for prevention.

Though inspiring, the prescription for the new children's officers that the Curtis Committee laid out was too general to be easily applied and some committees, as well as their appointees, held too closely to one of its main recommendations; namely, that the children's officer should have a personal relationship with the children for whom she (usually she) was responsible as well as with her staff. This could lead to unreasonable centralisation, to a reluctance to delegate and to a preoccupation with detail at the expense of the broader issues. Nevertheless, it is fitting to end on a note of approbation for what many children's officers and their staff achieved between 1948 and 1970. Partly by their individual and collective efforts and partly through the work of the ACO and of its companion group the Association of Child Care Officers (ACCO),<sup>10</sup> as well as other pressure groups and an emerging body of research,<sup>11</sup> services for children and their families were transformed, the extent of which is still not always appreciated. Much was achieved against the odds.

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<sup>10</sup> Like the ACO, the ACCO was also created in 1949. In one of the series of essays contained in its commemorative report of 1970, Clare Winnicott pointed out that in its inaugural year there were just 12 members but that by 1970 there were 2,589. Furthermore, she emphasised its importance in creating a sense of professional identity and professionalism in child care thereby, together with the ACOs, laying a bedrock for an emerging social work profession and its parallel body the British Association of Social Work (pp 74–5).

<sup>11</sup> Today those involved with the provision and development of children's services have a plethora of research and journals upon which to call. The first children's officers and those around them had hardly any. Indeed, it was not until the mid-1960s that these sources of information began to be available (see Parker, 2005).

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