

UNISON report on the results of our Family Services Survey 2018



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UNISON REPORT ON THE RESULTS OF UNISON'S FAMILY SERVICES SURVEY

“There is evidence that workers tend to treat the service user in the same way as they themselves are treated by their managers”

Eileen Munro 2011 (Munro Review of Child Protection)

“People are crying at their desks because they cannot cope”

Barnet Family Services social worker 2017

“Managers arrogant and bullying. No respect for workers”

Barnet Family Services social worker 2017

“Managers avoid relationships with social workers and hide behind their emails”

Barnet Family Services social worker 2017

“Because of the time it has taken to establish a more stable core of high quality managers, social workers have, over a year or more, experienced a chain of new managers arriving and introducing new systems without those social workers being involved or trained, with many reporting that they do not understand the changes or why they are being introduced. Those managers then quickly leave, and new managers repeat the cycle.”

Report into Children's Social Care Services in the London Borough of Barnet, by Frankie Sulke, January 2018

1. Recommendations

1.1 London Borough of Barnet should carry out an urgent, independent investigation into the allegations of bullying in Family Services.

The starting point for us to have confidence in the independence of the investigator must be that they have no prior connection to anyone in Family Services and that they must be of the view that a colleague working to contracted hours is not showing a lack of commitment to their work and that it is reasonable for colleagues to want to have a life outside of their work commitments. The investigator must also have an understanding as to what the supervision requirements and recommendations are for social workers as highlighted by a number of reports over the years. The investigator must have the appropriate level of seniority in order to report on all levels of management in Family Services, including the Senior Management Team (SMT). The findings of their report must be made public so that all can be assured as to the extent of the problem. There should be a discussion following the investigation as to how to take the findings forward which should include Trade Union participation.

1.2 Carry out a quantitative and qualitative audit of supervision.

Supervision is the backbone of Quality Assurance and also of support for social workers carrying out an incredibly and increasingly difficult and sensitive job. It is the ABC of keeping workers and the service (in terms of provision to the public) safe.

UNISON therefore recommends that attention is focussed on the supervisor/ supervisee relationship and urgent work is undertaken to improve the frequency and quality of the supervision within Family Services.

Frankie Sulke has been appointed Commissioner for Children's Services in the London Borough of Barnet by the Secretary of State for Education. Her recent "Report into Children's Social Care Services in the London Borough of Barnet" highlights further action required to remove barriers to make rapid and sustained improvements. At 5.17.1 p.24 she states "**it will be key for the Council to: [...] secure a consistent understanding of expectations and practice standards**". Yet without regular, good quality supervision how can this be achieved?

2. Background

2.1 Throughout 2017 and particularly since the damning Ofsted report Barnet UNISON has heard anecdotally that things were not well with Family Services. Of key concern was the repeated reference to an "authoritarian, bullying atmosphere" and an unrelenting demand from managers for workers to sacrifice everything, work all hours but then not be appreciated by those managers for the work they were doing. Colleagues also talked about a high turnover of staff.

2.2 In the last quarter of 2017 we distributed a questionnaire with mostly open questions amongst our frontline social worker members. The results supported the anecdotal reports we had received and so we must conclude that Barnet Family Services is not a safe place to work. We have also not received any hard contradictory evidence from the Senior Management Team which provides us with any reassurance to the contrary.

2.3 Frankie Sulke finds in paragraph 4.3.3 of her report:

"poor engagement and communication with staff leading to a serious disconnect between children's senior management and the front line" as one of the reasons why the ***"improvement work had not impacted as expected"***.

2.4 Barnet UNISON has attempted to engage with the Senior Management Team in Family Services but has found the SMT to be highly reluctant participants at best and at worst dismissive of our concerns. A reasonable request we have been pursuing for several months i.e. to have access to actual levels of caseloads (something which other Boroughs are willing to share with Trade Union colleagues) has been turned down outright.

2.5 Furthermore it is our common experience that whenever the Trade Unions identify a problem within a Service the organisation adopts a defensive position for fear that this will undermine the public image of the Commissioning Council. For example UNISON opposed the Family Service restructure in 2015, even escalating the matter to the General Functions Committee as we foresaw the detrimental impact it was already having on the workforce. The rest is history. Senior Managers and Councillors ignored the voice of the union and ploughed on regardless of our concerns.

Frankie Sulke in her report at paragraph 4.9 states:

"While many within the service were acutely aware of the failing described by Ofsted, both before and after inspection, there was a general lack of in-depth understanding elsewhere. Prior to inspection, this was exacerbated by over-optimistic reporting of progress, including

to the Improvement Board, and by inaccurate information, arising from audits and quality assurance processes.”

2.6 The phrase ***“over-optimistic reporting of progress”*** resonates with UNISON. We refer to it as the “Emperors New Clothes” culture. Everyone knows what is going wrong but no one wants to raise their head above the parapet to point out what is as plain as the nose on your face. Sadly in this case it is the long term demise of one of the most frontline services a local authority can provide that has suffered. Family Services was ignored because it was viewed as operational i.e. not strategic enough to be included in the discussions being held at the most senior officer meetings in the Council. It was relegated to the second tier.

2.7 We welcome that this ‘cultural issue’ was identified by Frankie Sulke when she states in paragraph 4.7.3 of her report:

“There are some cultural issues to be addressed at the corporate level which may relate to the legacy of the commissioning/delivery split. Because the focus of SCB had become higher level transformational and strategic change issues, day to day ‘business as usual’ matters began to be seen as less important and were not normally discussed at top level. In addition, Family Services had become particularly siloed within SCB which meant it did not benefit to the full from corporate support.”

3. The Findings

3.1 We had a **60%** response rate and of those **20%** have worked for Barnet for less than 5 years. This was elicited from the first question and in total we asked 6 questions.

3.2 What do you like about working for Family Services in Barnet?

3.2.1 It was fairly clear from our members that they mostly like the kind of work they do (**52%**) and enjoy positive relationships with their team colleagues (**40%**)

- *“I know my families”;*
- *“Enjoy when I complete meaningful, helpful pieces of work with families”;*
- *“What I am able to do for the children”*
- *“supportive relationship with my team colleagues”;*
- *“some of the staff”*

3.2.2 For smaller numbers the location was an important factor (**16%**). However, **16%** were not able to identify anything positive about working for Barnet.

3.3 What do you not like about working for Family Services in Barnet?

3.3.1 64% expressed negative views about management

- “Managers arrogant and bullying. No respect for workers”
- *“managers avoid relationships with social workers and hide behind their emails”*
- *“Management too political and sometimes become unprofessional”*

3.3.2 32% expressed views about a negative atmosphere/ culture

- *“Current “watch my back” atmosphere”*
- *“some people are treated differently to others “if-your-face-fits” culture”*
- *“Current climate is very uneasy. Low morale.”*

3.3.3 28% expressed a feeling of having no voice/ being ignored/ not being able to speak up

- “if they [managers] listened they wouldn’t be inadequate”
- “no one has the courage to say things, no one will speak out and no feels safe”
- “you’re made to feel you’re part of a process in decision making but really you’re not”

3.3.4 28% expressed views about the turnover of staff

- *“Number of longstanding staff have left with little or no notice. Huge loss of experience and commitment”*
- *“managers disappearing and no one ever hearing why and things like that”*
- *“I’ve had 11 managers in 6 and half years”*

3.3.5 24% explicitly used the word “bullying” when talking about management or the general atmosphere

3.3.6 24% talked about the high workload

3.3.7 24% expressed views about lack of opportunity to progress or flourish

- *“Lack of equal opps/ openness and transparency”*
- *“The current climate is very challenging. This reduces opportunities to grow creatively.”*
- *“People putting their friends into jobs.”*

3.3.8 A further 16% were critical of the quality of supervision and lack of supervision.

3.4 Do you have supervision at least once a month (pro-rata for part-time workers)?

3.4.1 48% of social workers have regular supervision and very worryingly 48% of social workers report they do not have regular supervision. It must be noted that the 48% who do regularly get supervision are not all convinced of the quality of that supervision.

3.5 Are you currently looking for another job?

3.5.1 64% responded that they are looking for another job whilst 32% are not looking. However, amongst that 32% are colleagues who are looking to retire or who have other exit plans.

3.6 What would make you stay?

3.6.1 32% responded with either nothing or that they didn't know.

3.6.2 28% thought that the environment should be improved – both the physical and psychological environment

- *“Stop working in an environment where people just vanish”*
- *“Not enough space”*
- *“Less chaos. It's a very chaotic place to work.”*

3.6.3 25% wanted to see an improvement in management:

- *“Senior managers learning to appreciate social workers who are committed...They [managers] talk about resilient families – but what about the workforce, their welfare and building their resilience”*
- *“If I knew the whole senior management group were permanent. Prioritise building the team and staff morale”*
- *“Not feel like I'm being micro-managed”*

3.6.4 16% wanted to see a reduced caseload whilst 16% simply thought there should be recognition of the good work being done.

4. Summary

4.1 The findings of our questionnaire have broadly substantiated anecdotal concerns UNISON has received regarding the authoritarian and disrespectful manner in which staff are treated in Family Services.

4.2 Barnet UNISON has received no reassurance from the Senior Management Team that these concerns are being taken seriously. Our own experience is that data we request and which other areas of the Council readily provide is either not shared, shared late or shared after much prevarication.

4.3 We are concerned about the Health, Safety and Wellbeing of our members. The employer has a duty of care to its employed staff which we believe is being ignored by the current Senior Management Team.

4.4 We believe this oppressive practice carries with it a serious risk that outcomes for children will not be improved.

4.5 There appears to be a view that the goal of achieving a better Ofsted rating is paramount and that the needs of front-line staff are secondary. Barnet UNISON profoundly disagrees with this view and furthermore we question whether such an objective is achievable without Senior Management ensuring that workers are fully supported.

4.6 Good supervision is recognised as being central to the management, oversight and care of staff. It is something which keeps the Service safe. Yet over 6 months following an “inadequate” Ofsted rating 48% of our members say they do not receive regular supervision. The quality of the supervision also leaves something to be desired. It is astonishing that supervision has not received the same obsessive attention to detail to which many of our colleagues are subjected over the targets they are expected to achieve.

5. Conclusion

5.1 We know Ofsted takes issue with social worker caseloads being too high. The Duty and Assessment team workers are said to carry an average caseload of 30 (CELS report 16th January 2018). This means some colleagues are carrying many more than this. This is dangerous. It is also unsustainable. We also know that Ofsted is concerned about the quality of good leadership. *Community Care* gave this feedback from Ofsted in 2016:

Ofsted has warned councils they need to tackle social worker caseloads that are “too high”, after identifying it as a common problem in poorly performing authorities.

The watchdog said too many social workers were “pressing on in conditions that are unacceptable” as its annual social care report revealed concerns over caseload levels have been found at 14 councils inspected since January.

Unmanageable workloads robbed social workers of the time they needed to devote to children and were a common feature in ‘inadequate’-rated services, Ofsted said.

“Good quality leadership was the “single most important” factor in improving services, with the best leadership teams having created environments for social workers “to flourish”, it added.

“When social workers work for good leaders and managers, they work in an environment where they feel fully supported. Because of the way that leaders and managers behave, staff feel confident. A culture of openness and transparency means that social workers feel more responsible as well as more able to reflect,” the report said.

“Social workers need time to spend with the children and families on their case list. They need a place of work that makes it possible for them to exercise their profession at the highest level. They need managers who trust and challenge them in equal measure.”

5.2 The information Barnet UNISON has received shows that managers will do the “challenging” bit all too readily but the “trust” element is missing and it is worse than just that.

5.3 Family Services should be about providing good support so that all families can thrive. Where families are not able to do this on their own and children are at “risk of significant harm” then Family Services is there to safeguard the children. Frankie Sulke comments in her report at paragraph 5.18:

“The Council has accepted the need for improving engagement with staff in order to address the disconnect between senior management and front line.”

5.4 UNISON welcomes that acknowledgment but to date we have seen no evidence of this at the frontline and unless this is actioned in a positive manner we fear for the service and the wellbeing of our members and the families they are trying to support.

5.5 Positive engagement from Barnet’s management and leadership team with the Essex team will not in and of itself result in an improved engagement with staff. A good starting point would be to view the current workforce as serious partners, to be respected, to be “agents of change” rather than “receivers of change” (to quote Frankie Sulke).

5.6 If our recommendations are ignored then we can only hope to be proved wrong. In the meantime the message we are communicating to our members is that the London Borough of Barnet Family Services is not a safe place for social workers.

6. Acknowledgements

6.1 Barnet UNISON would like to give thanks to those colleagues who responded to the survey. Most were anxious about repercussions if they responded at all and almost all struggled to complete it fearing for the time they would lose on their caseload and the impact there. This, in itself, is indicative of the pressures facing colleagues in that service. Such is the very high turnover of staff that some whom completed this UNISON survey have already managed to “escape” from Barnet.

7. References

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