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Ref: MM/ma.

Dear Val

Children Affected by Parental Drug or Alcohol Problems

I write on behalf of the ADSW Children and Families Standing Committee in relation to the above.

Significant progress has been made in Scotland in terms of services for children and those for adults with substance misuse problems working together to reduce the risks to children. However, there appear to be some ambiguities in statements emanating from the Scottish Executive, and it would be helpful for these to be clarified.

For example, in some documents from the Executive, and in some recent joint inspection reports, there seems to be an expectation that a full assessment of children's circumstances or a full parenting assessment should be undertaken when any substance using parent comes into contact with any service. In other documents (for example Brian Cole's letter to Chief Social Work Officers/Criminal Justice Social Work Managers of 20 December 2006) it is suggested that adult services should consider whether children's circumstances might be compromised and, if there are concerns, these should be passed on to children's social work services. This is well short of parenting assessments or assessment of children's circumstances in every case. Clarification of this issue would be welcome, particularly in the light of what appears to be the adoption of certain standards by inspection teams that may not be consistent with standards adopted by services in response to guidance.

In addition to these ambiguities, official documents sometimes refer to "drug misusing parents" and sometimes to "substance misusing parents". The emphasis

on drug use understandably reflects political priorities, but does not necessarily reflect risk or need in respect of individual circumstances, as alcohol can raise similar difficulties and potentially present risks on a far greater scale.

A number of key issues arise, and it may be helpful for these to be considered as part of a wider debate to which ADSW would be very pleased to contribute. I list a few examples.

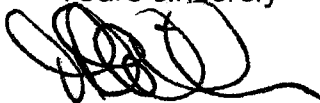
1. Is it desirable that a full assessment of parenting ability and/or a child's circumstances takes place every time a parent with a substance problem is identified? If yes, does the Children (Scotland) Act 1995 allow for this in the absence of any other identified concerns about a child? The complexities of this issue and of the concept of proportionality could usefully be explored.
2. If it is desirable to undertake full assessments in every case, children's services social work staff may be the most appropriate resource to do so, however, under current arrangements, they are not resourced to undertake this task effectively.
3. Ambiguity around the emphasis on "parental drug use" as opposed to "substance use" is unhelpful.
4. Alcohol and drug problems cover a very wide continuum of behaviour and whilst the focus must be on every child's individual circumstances, a fuller debate is needed regarding the parameters of parental behaviour.

The implementation of GIRFEC and the introduction of Integrated Assessment Frameworks should assist in alleviating some of these difficulties, however, greater clarity is still needed. The uncertainties leave staff in both children's and adult services vulnerable to the criticism that they did not pursue particular courses of action when there is no agreed national standard or definition for these matters.

I appreciate that this is a developing agenda and that expectations and understanding of what constitutes best practice are continually advancing, however, the present ambiguities and lack of clarity outlined above seem to be hindering progress towards the best protection of children within current resources.

I look forward to your thoughts on this issue and to supporting any initiative that may assist in progressing this agenda.

Yours sincerely



Michelle Miller
Convener ADSW Children & Families Standing Committee