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Short Article

The Home Office children's department: Implementing the 1948 Children's Act, 1950-1970

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Abstract:

It is now little remembered that the UK's Home Office was once responsible for overseeing the state care of children in England and Wales. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Home Office children's department issued a series of detailed reports that monitored the implementation of the modernising measures of the 1948 Children Act (an Act that also applied to Scotland). Evolution in the provision of children's homes, in both the state and voluntary sectors, features strongly in the article, since the shift away from large institutions to smaller homes and to foster care was a central aim of the 1948 Act. This article outlines some of the main developments during this period, as described in these reports. Its main purpose is to illustrate the value of these reports and thereby encourage researchers to engage with them as primary sources on the history of residential childcare in the UK.

Introduction

The two decades from 1950 to 1970 were the most distinctive in the post-war history of state childcare in England and Wales. They witnessed the implementation of the only UK Act of Parliament, the 1948 Children Act, solely concerned with children in the care of the state. The Home Office children's department oversaw the implementation of the 1948 Act. The reports it issued in 1951, 1955, 1961, 1964, and 1967 (Home Office, 1951, 1955, 1961, 1964, 1967) incorporated statistical data, detailed commentary on policy and practice, and the findings of its inspectors.

This article seeks to illustrate the value of these reports and to encourage their use as historical documents. The reports mostly covered youth justice matters, for which the Home Office also held responsibility (specifically; trends in youth crime, the work of juvenile courts, and the operation of approved schools and



remand homes). However, they also contain a wealth of detail on the post-war care system for children 'deprived of a normal home life' (Home Office, 1951, p.1). The early reports even contain evocative photographs. The change which had occurred as a result of the 1948 Children Act is partly evident from comparing these reports to the sparse and bleak entry on 'Orphanages and Preventive Rescue and other Children's Homes' in their predecessor, the 1938 report of what was then the children's branch of the Home Office (Home Office, 1938, pp.103-109).

The 1948 Act brought previously disparate responsibilities relating to children in care, spread across several government departments, solely within the remit of the Home Office. It also vested delivery of its measures in new local government children's committees and children's officers. The Act also applied to Scotland. However, several factors, such as the dominance of foster care in Scotland and the small size of many Scottish local authorities, led to differences in the implementation of the Act (see Murphy, 1992, pp.22-34, 98-101). In any case, Scottish developments are absent from these Home Office reports, since they were overseen by the home department of the Scottish Office (Murphy, 1992, p.32).

Implementing the 1948 Act

Central to the 1948 Act was a strong inspection regime. John Croft, a senior Home Office official during these two decades, later described a decentralised inspectorate, located in six regional groups. Visits to local authority children's homes mostly 'took place during the afternoon and early evening so as to ensure that the staff were available and to see the children'. The aim was to visit residential establishments at least once a year, and such visits 'were usually made without notice'. Teams of inspectors might spend days in a large authority, including visits to foster children (Croft, 1992, pp.30-31). An ability to engage with children was seen as integral to an inspector's role:

...Observation of their demeanour, response and activities, as well as attitude to staff, and what they said (or did not say), was more often than not indicative of the conduct of a children's home or school, and sometimes of the quality of a foster home placement. (Croft 1992, p.31).

Croft presents the inspectorate as a driver of change, pushing local authorities to replace larger children's homes with family group homes and to raise the proportion of children being fostered (Croft, 1992, p.33). It is therefore no surprise to see these themes feature strongly in the reports the Home Office issued.

The pace of change during this period was partly influenced by the number of children entering care. Reducing the institutional sector was initially constrained by increasing numbers of children entering the care of local authorities in England and Wales in the immediate aftermath of the 1948 Act. However, by the



end of the 1950s, overall numbers were down from 65,309 in November 1953 to 61,580 in March 1959. Thereafter, they increased throughout the early 1960s, with 69,157 children in the care of local authorities by 1966 (Home Office, 1967, p.5).

For modern readers, the most striking feature of the reasons given for children entering care during these decades is the lack of reference to child abuse. By the 21st century, abuse and neglect within the family was consistently the reason why most children entered care (for example, Department for Education, 2013, p.2). In the 1950s and 1960s, in contrast, most children entered local authority care due to parental illness or other lack of capacity. For example, 61.5% of children entered care in 1959-60 due to 'the illness of a parent or guardian (usually short term) or the mother's confinement.' (Home Office, 1961, p.1). The latter term refers to short-term admissions of siblings while a mother gave birth.

Since these reports cover the same areas, we can trace developments across most of these two decades in such fields as residential care, fostering, leaving care, and the voluntary sector. In what follows, we look at each of these in turn.

Residential care

During this period, children's homes were initially of various kinds. These are set out in the 1951 report:

- Family group homes, the favoured model for the future, housed no more than about 12 children, usually in houses indistinguishable from other domestic dwellings. Some were single-sex, others mixed. Age ranges also varied. They were typically staffed by a 'housemother' (and occasionally a 'housefather'), with an assistant and sometimes domestic help. Some homes employed married couples, with the husband working outside the home (Home Office, 1951, p.15).
- 'Cottage homes', a historical legacy, were usually in groups. These 'cottages' (often large houses) usually accommodated 10 to 20 children, 'in the care of a housemother and assistants or a married couple' (Home Office, 1951, p.16). One defect of this form of care is that it effectively created a village of children who were less likely to be integrated into the local community. Ironically, the more facilities such groups of homes had – swimming pools, sports pitches, etc. – the more this defect was accentuated (Home Office, 1951, pp.16-17)
- There were many other homes, of various sizes. The largest (run as a residential school) had 480 children. The large ones were noted to be 'institutional in character and [are] an embarrassing legacy' (Home Office, 1951, p.18). They often had large dormitories and playrooms. Most local authorities sought to close such homes during this period.
- There were also residential nurseries. These were mostly a legacy of World War Two (Heywood, 1978, p.136) and housed children under the age of five. There were 174 such nurseries provided under the 1948 Act



and 74 under the National Assistance Act. Their use steadily declined during this period (Home Office, 1967, p.10).

- Reception centres were a 1948 Act innovation, for boys aged between two and 12 and most girls aged between two and 16 who were likely to remain in care for more than six months (Home Office, 1951, p.21). There were 85 of these in England and Wales by 1961 (Home Office, 1961, p.5). The purpose of such centres was to 'provide the information necessary to enable the local authority to place each child according to his needs and capacity.' (Home Office, 1951, p.22).

Despite the initial pressure of numbers, there was progress in the shift to smaller homes. For example, there were 400 family group homes by the end of 1954 (Home Office, 1955, p.11) and 809 by 1963 (Home Office, 1964, p.4, 8). Where large homes still existed, there were experiments in developing smaller groups within such settings (Home Office, 1955, p.12).

Fostering

It is worth noting that, up until the 1967 report, what we now know as 'fostering' was routinely referred to as 'boarding out'. The 1951 report notes a clear bias in the 1948 Act towards increasing the use of boarding out as the first choice of care (Home Office, 1951, p.9). New boarding out regulations had come into force in 1946. These made boarding out easier as well as making it a duty, 'unless it is not practicable or desirable for the time being' (Home Office, 1951, p.11).

In this area, the Home Office were coolly critical of the voluntary sector. They noted that in 1949, 'only 3,581 of 28,760 children' in the voluntary sector were boarded out, meaning that the sector was 'not then making sufficient use of foster-homes' (Home Office, 1951, p.28). Elsewhere, we see a growing awareness of the cost savings offered by the shift to fostering. This was noted in the 1955 report (1955, p.19), but the 1961 report went further by providing figures showing that it cost four times as much for a local authority to keep a child in residential care as it did if they were fostered (Home Office, 1961, p.104).

By the time of the 1964 report, the pressure to increase fostering was paying off. This was especially so in the local authority sector. Fostering had risen from 35% of children in the care of local authorities in 1949 to 52% by 1963, though with wide variations between authorities (Home Office, 1964, pp.3-4). However, by the time of the 1967 report this expansion had stalled. Absolute numbers had increased slightly, but the percentage of children in local authority foster care was down from 52% to 50.5% in three years. Various demographic reasons were cited, including the increasing number of women going out to work. It had also been recognised that fostering had its limitations, in that: '[s]ome children find it more difficult to live happily in the intimacy of a foster home than in the larger and less emotionally demanding atmosphere of a children's home' (Home Office, 1961, p.6).



Leaving care

The 1948 Act replaced 'haphazard' leaving care arrangements with a local authority duty to 'advise and befriend', up to the age of 18, any child who had left care after the school leaving age (then 15) who needed such support and lived in their area (Home Office, 1951, p.32). The Act had also given powers (but not duties) to local authorities to offer financial aid towards accommodation and educational expenses for their care leavers between the ages of 18 and 21 (or even later, if a course of education was ongoing). In 1949, 97 young people (53 male, 44 female) were receiving such assistance (Home Office, 1951, p.33).

Local authorities were also empowered to establish hostels for those leaving care and still under the age of 21. These hostels were intended, 'in the main to accommodate children who have been brought up in children's homes and will be situated near the place where the boys and girls may be employed, or receiving education or training.' (Home Office, 1951, p.22). They varied in character:

Some leave boys and girls largely to their own devices: others provide wardens and matrons with understanding of the needs of adolescence, who encourage attendance at evening classes, and membership of youth clubs and social organisations. In the better hostels there are common rooms where friends may be entertained, quiet rooms for study, suitable furniture, equipment for indoor games and a homely atmosphere. (Home Office, 1951, p.23).

However, the more common options for care leavers were 'lodgings and industrial hostels'. Where these were scarce, children were sometimes 'retained too long in children's homes' (Home Office, 1951, p.23).

By 1954, there were 60 hostels (Home Office, 1955, p.16), some of which were provided by the voluntary sector. Alongside this, 212 care leavers over the age of 18 were receiving financial help under the 1948 Act's provisions (Home Office, 1955, p.19). This had risen to 305 by March 1960 (Home Office, 1961, p.16). As is the case with many modern official reports, the Home Office was keen to flag up success stories under the new approach. This included one young care leaver who had been supported towards getting a first-class honours degree and was currently studying for a PhD in France (Home Office, 1955, p.19).

Given that local authority provision of hostels was discretionary, it is unsurprising that there were relatively few of them and that progress soon stalled. By March 1960, local authorities in England and Wales had 29 such hostels for boys, 31 for girls, and one mixed hostel. In total, these housed 953 young people. Alongside this, however, some local authorities were becoming more creative in easing leaving care transitions, such as by providing single-room annexes to existing children's homes or separate hostel buildings next to the home and with shared staff (Home Office, 1961, p.13). Beyond this, the report noted that many children from foster care remained with their foster parents even after starting work and after they ceased to be in care. Otherwise, care leavers could often be



found in lodgings, or in hostels provided by such voluntary bodies as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA). Still others ended up on residential vocational or training courses.

In the 1964 report, data on hostels was absent. The 1967 report, though more fulsome, merely confirmed the lack of progress. 1,033 young people under the age of 21 were now in 'hostels for working boys and girls'. This was only a small advance on the 1,014 of three years earlier (Home Office, 1967, p.12). This suggests that use of this power had reached a ceiling with respect to those local authorities and voluntary organisations who both saw the need and had the resources for this form of support.

The voluntary sector

Direct voluntary sector childcare provision during this period was in steady decline. The 1951 report notes that voluntary homes (run by Barnardo's, The National Children's Home, and many other large and small charities) began this period caring for 25,179 children in homes, 3,581 children 'boarded out', and 5,698 children placed in voluntary sector homes by local authorities but remaining the responsibility of those authorities (Home Office, 1951, p.23). As in the statutory sector, there was a growing shift to family group homes. Indeed, as the Home Office acknowledged, this shift to family-size groups, 'had been adopted for many years by the more progressive organisations, which had been the first to recognise the value of this arrangement.' (Home Office, 1951, p.25).

By November 1954, there were only 21,918 children in voluntary sector homes, even including the 5,326 who were in the care of local authorities but accommodated by the voluntary sector (Home Office, 1955, p.25). Half of these latter were in Roman Catholic voluntary sector homes, suggesting that local authorities were struggling to find sufficient foster homes for Roman Catholic children (Home Office, 1955, p.26; Home Office, 1961, pp.21-22). The 16,600 for whom the voluntary sector took full responsibility had been placed with them by family members, religious leaders, or social workers. In addition to the children in homes, the voluntary organisations were now 'boarding out' 3,560 children (18% of the total), a slowly increasing proportion of those in their care (Home Office, 1955, p.26).

The number of children in voluntary sector care had gone down to 19,103 by 1960 (Home Office, 1961, p.21). This reduction was not being made up for by fostering, since the percentage fostered had only increased to 20% (Home Office, 1961, p.21). By the time of the 1967 report, the number of children in the care of the voluntary sector had fallen even more rapidly, down to 10,839 (Home Office, 1967, p.6).



Legacy

The 1967 Home Office report was the last to be issued. The following year, the Seebohm Committee was established, charting a new direction for children's services. The Seebohm Report led to the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970. The world of children's committees and children's officers and the oversight of the Home Office came to an end. Seebohm sought the creation of social work structures that could address the needs of the 'problem family' and thus help to forestall youth crime as well as children entering care. Children's officers and children's committees were absorbed within larger, more generic, social services departments that were overseen by the Department of Health and Social Security (see Jones, 2021, pp.97-104, 116-124).

The reforms of these two decades were a major advance on the pre-war care system. There is no better way to recognise this than to read the scathing assessment of that system in the Curtis Report, which designed these reforms (Curtis, 1946). However, the new system created its own problems. For example, the choices made by foster carers led to a strong gender bias. By November 1954, 39% of boys in local authority care were fostered, in contrast to 51% of girls (Home Office, 1955, p.6). The move to fostering also affected sibling groups. From research conducted in 1957, the Home Office knew that 56% of children in local authority care also had siblings in care. Of these, the majority were separated (Home Office, 1961, p.7). 79% of foster homes only had one child in them. The result was that 58% of family groups of two or more children were split between two or more foster placements (Home Office, 1961, p.7). One obvious solution, practiced by many authorities, was to keep sibling groups in residential care (Home Office, 1961, p.8).

Also, these reports contain major omissions. For example, there is no discussion of race or ethnicity, with their sole interest in what we might today call identity issues being in the religious denomination of children in care. It is to other sources on this period (e.g. Braithwaite, 1963; Holman, 1996) that we must go if we want detail on what was clearly very common racial and ethnic discrimination in the care system during this time. The same is true regarding the abuse of children in care. Here again, Holman's retrospective account of what was happening in Manchester during this period is a sobering corrective to the official account (Holman, 1996). Holman's well-researched analysis of the work of local government childcare professionals provides numerous examples of the ignoring or hiding of such abuse.

The value of these five reports lies more narrowly. They show us how the implementation of the 1948 Children Act looked from the perspective of central government civil servants. Through their pages we see a world long gone. A short article such as this cannot hope to do justice to the content of these documents. I can only hope to have whetted the appetites of interested readers. This period was an important bridge between the era of institutional care and the



modern world of social services departments. Its strongest legacy, of course, lies in the lives of the tens of thousands of children raised in its care (of which the author is one). Many of the changes noted in this article will have impacted directly on their lives. Those children are mostly still with us, now as older adults, with their own memories of the world set out in the reports of the Home Office children's department.

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