

RESPONSE TO WHITE PAPER AS IT RELATES TO CHILD PROTECTION

PACT warmly welcomes the government White Paper with its emphasis on eliminating bureaucracies and making police forces more accountable to their communities.

But so far as PACT's specific concerns, The White Paper, and subsequent comments by Home Office ministers, are unclear about future structures and responsibilities for handling missing and abducted children in the UK. Since this is PACT's primary concern, we must reserve judgement on the Government's proposals until further detail is made available. But, PACT has a very clear view of how the problem of missing and abducted children should be tackled. We set this out in the paragraphs that follow. Our final judgement will, therefore, depend on the degree to which the Government's new policy satisfies what we consider to be the essential requirements for protecting the nation's children.

There have been improvements at the margin in recent years. But, fundamentally, the structures, systems and policies for protecting children are broken and in urgent need of fixing. PACT has spent a decade analysing the problem; publishing the results of our research

in a series of reports¹; and advocating remedies. The problem starts with inadequate data. Research and such statistics that exist point to a growing problem of missing and abducted children in the UK. But the continuing failure of police forces and Whitehall departments to use uniform data bases, compatible computer systems, and agreed definitions and categories means that, by a very large margin, we do not know exactly how many children go missing each year or what happens to them while they are missing. The April to June 2009 Quarterly Returns Summary (issued on 9 September) of the NPIA's Missing Persons Bureau acknowledges this in terms. Only recently there has been a statistical conflict between the FCO and the Home Office over how many children are the victims of international parental child abduction, a relatively small category in the total of missing children².

The data issue goes well beyond the decentralised nature of UK policing. It is a symptom of a much broader and fundamental problem: no single entity takes responsibility for the protection of children. The result is not just statistical inadequacy; but policy confusion and the fragmentation of effort and resources. The landscape of missing and abducted children is populated by police forces, police agencies, Whitehall departments, local authorities, charities, children's commissioners, among whom there is precious little coordination and all too often competition. As a result, there is not even agreement on what constitutes a child; or whether missing children should be lumped together with missing adults or treated as a discrete problem (PACT is firmly of the view that children who go

¹ See PACT's three reports ...

² See letter to the Telegraph

missing present unique challenges that often demand a qualitatively different approach from missing adults).

It may be argued that, since children's welfare requires a plethora of skills to combat abuse and risk, it is inevitable that many agencies and charities need to be involved. PACT does not dispute that. But, we strongly believe that the organisation of resources and skills can be vastly improved – and that a highly successful model already exists, from which there are many lessons to be learnt. PACT has argued over the years that the UK needs something like the USA's National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC), based in Alexandria, Virginia. It is to be noted that NCMEC has rapidly taken root in a political environment, which constitutionally favours decentralisation to a far greater degree than in the UK. The organisation has five basic characteristics, which, in PACT's view, would translate well into the UK.

- Firstly, though mandated by the US Congress, it operates as a public/private partnership, drawing on funds from both the federal budget and the private sector.
- Secondly, though it has FBI staff embedded at its headquarters and enjoys close cooperation with police forces throughout the USA, NCMEC is not a constituent part of any police agency. It is an independent entity, answerable to Congress.
- Thirdly, it operates on the principle that missing and exploited children are a unique challenge, not to be lumped in with adults and that there is a close relationship between “missing” and “exploited”.

- **Fourthly**, it is responsible for all aspects of missing children and assembles under one roof a full spectrum of expertise on children's welfare.
- **Fifthly**, through its sister organisation, the International Center for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC, of which PACT is an affiliate), it has developed an international reach and, for example, works closely with the UK's Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) agency.

NCMEC has an enviable record in matters of child protection, which we in the UK would do well to emulate. PACT believes very strongly that the way forward is the creation of a UK national centre that would have the five essential criteria of NCMEC, namely:

1. It would act as a public/private partnership.
2. It would be an autonomous agency, working closely with the police, but not under the police.
3. It would reflect the core judgement that missing children are a problem different in kind from that of missing adults.
4. It would have responsibility for all aspects of missing children, assembling under one roof the necessary experts, from the public, private and charitable sectors, to make this possible.
5. It would be empowered to work closely with similar bodies and agencies abroad.

Against this background, PACT warmly welcomes the emphasis placed by the White Paper on CEOP's role in child protection, though its exact mandate is unclear, as is its relationship with the proposed

National Crime Agency (NCA). In PACT's view, CEOP has proved strikingly effective, while the role of the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) in child protection has not been a success. Indeed, it is PACT's contention that CEOP is ideally placed to evolve into the kind of national centre, whose essential features are set out above.

In short, PACT exhorts the Government to take this opportunity for radical change, by creating a national centre for missing and abducted/exploited children; and, in an age of austerity, to do so by allowing the already existing CEOP to develop on the basis of the five principles set out above. PACT's final view on the Government's reforms will depend on the extent to which Ministers are prepared to go down this path.



Lady Meyer

Founder of PACT