

# How Hackney reclaimed child protection social work

Is a model of social work that radically transformed child protection in one borough about to go mainstream?

**Juliet Rix**

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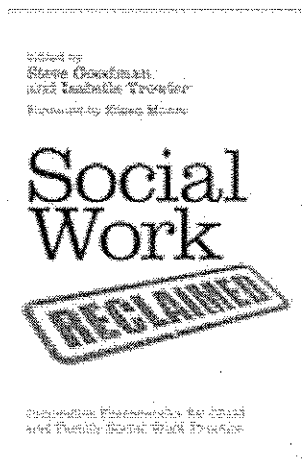


Steve Goodman and Isabelle Trowler, who overhauled the way that social workers dealt with families in Hackney. Photo: Graham Turner for the Guardian

It reads like the Christmas wishlist of every council's children's services department: a 40% reduction in the number of children going into care, staff sick leave halved, being hailed as an example of best practice in an independent government review, and costs cut. All were achieved by Hackney council's children's services, in east London, under the leadership of Steve Goodman and Isabelle Trowler.

**Social Work Reclaimed: Innovative Frameworks for Child and Family Social Work Practice**

The pair – who met in 2005 when Goodman had recently been appointed deputy director of children's services and Trowler was a newly arrived assistant director of children's social care – are credited with transforming children and family social work practices in the borough and influencing government policy. They have written a book about their model of social work and last year set up a social enterprise to help other councils adopt it; they



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have since left Hackney.

When they arrived in the borough, they found many social workers simply lacked the skills required to do the job, both because of the quality of people entering the profession and inadequate training. The system had become so bound up with tick-box bureaucracy that social workers spent more time filling in forms than working with children and families.

"Children were going into care who, if you did the job properly, wouldn't need to," says Trowler. But what was happening in Hackney reflected what was happening across England, adds Goodman.

Every inquiry into a child death (such as those following the killings of Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly), has made the system more inflexible and defensive, Goodman and Trowler believe. "Child protection is about assessing and managing risk. If you are risk-averse you can't do the job," says Goodman. "Instead of working with the family you just take the child away."

Trowler adds: "You can follow the rules, but it won't necessarily help the child ... it's conveyor-belt social work."

### Like-minded

So the like-minded colleagues set about trying to change things. "At first, we tried to work within the traditional model," explains Goodman, "but we kept realising we were in a cul-de-sac." By 2006, they had realised that "whole-system change" was called for. The result was a new model they called Reclaiming Social Work (RSW), which won the support of the council's chief executive and elected leaders. "People thought we were barmy," says Trowler, "to think we could make such huge changes."

But Goodman, 55, and Trowler, 44, were energetic, determined and organised – and complemented each other perfectly.

Goodman grew up on a council estate in Luton with direct experience of social workers coming into the house. He says that seeing social workers work with his own family "formed quite a lot of my values about how we should approach families. Social workers may not feel very powerful but when we knock on someone's door, [to them] we seem very powerful. We need to be aware of that and be respectful. That does not detract in any way from our responsibility to protect children." He started his career 30 years ago in Leicester.

Trowler has worked for various London boroughs and has a master's degree in social

work and social policy from the London School of Economics.

"There are no quick fixes," Trowler insists. "RSW is an agenda for change over three to five years" and it needs to be implemented "with military precision" in order to be effective. In budgetary terms, it requires a bit of extra money upfront but costs quickly begin to fall.

A residential placement for a child costs about £2,500 a week, points out Goodman, so with fewer children taken into care under RSW it doesn't take long to recoup the costs of extra training and family support services.

In Hackney, numbers of children in care have declined steadily from 470 in 2004 (not especially high compared with areas of similar deprivation) to about 270 now. Costs are down by 5%.

Few of Hackney's original social workers from 2006 got posts in the new system. Trowler and Goodman introduced verbal reasoning and other pre-interview tests for job applicants and took over the interviewing themselves. At first, they say, it was hard to attract good candidates – the borough had a terrible reputation – but as word got around about what they were doing, that changed.

Staff learn systemic approaches – looking at all the key relationships in a child's life and how they can be improved to create the best outcome for the child.

Another essential element to RSW is the working culture in the organisation. Goodman believes that there must be an environment that is energising and in which thinking and creativity are encouraged, where there is support and good humour and mistakes are accepted and put right as quickly as possible. There also needs to be real understanding for the families. "Culture trumps everything," he says.

So what does RSW mean for families? Goodman recalls a family of six children who had been on social services' lists for years because of neglect. "The children were going to school dirty and smelling of urine, they were underfed and the parents were unco-operative," he says. "Eventually, Hackney got care orders for all six children. The older ones kept running away from foster placements. The new unit worked with the family, and the older children were able to go home."

Trowler cites a mother with learning difficulties. "She was really struggling. She was doing her best and the relationships in the family were warm and loving, but she couldn't manage the practicalities of looking after five children. Usually, these kids would be removed, but we decided instead to invest in family support, practical help – long-term, so the children could stay at home."

An independent [review of child protection for the government](#) by LSE professor Eileen

Munro earlier this year highlighted RSW as an example of best practice.

## Beating a path

As a result, councils are beating a path to the door of the pair's social enterprise, Morning Lane Associates – named after the road in Hackney where the former council employees worked.

Morning Lane Associates already has contracts with 16 councils, including Cambridgeshire, which is about to implement the RSW model. "They have just recruited their first 26 consultant social workers to start work in January," says Goodman, "and they will make it work. They understand the culture change."

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## Spot the difference

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Traditionally, individual social workers have a caseload of perhaps 15 children (depending on the type of case). A team manager oversees often seven or eight social workers – and so probably more than 100 at-risk children, many of whom they will not have met.

In the RSW model, children are allocated to a unit headed by a consultant social worker who is both manager and practitioner. They lead another social worker, a children's practitioner, a clinical specialist and a unit co-ordinator. The co-ordinator undertakes all administration.

Weekly meetings are held to discuss the families before deciding how to move forward. Responsibility for what is to be done is shared by the unit. There is more trust and delegation of responsibility, with a social worker who sees the need to spend, say, £20 on something for a family, having no need to delay for managerial approval, for example.

If a family is difficult, two staff members can visit together. If a staff member is away, there is always another who knows the family's story. During a crisis, several informed people can address it at once.



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