

TRANSCRIPT OF "FILE ON 4" – "CARERS IN CONFLICT"

CURRENT AFFAIRS GROUP

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CUFFE: The number of children entering the care system is at a record level. More than 65,000 are currently in care in England alone – and for most of them it’s foster parents who provide the support and stability they need.

LORRAINE: He was a lost, absolutely lost little boy, very scared, his eyes were dark. But when he comes to you for that brief second and he just puts his arm around you, it’s absolutely priceless.

CUFFE: The majority of placements go well, but what rights do foster parents have when things go wrong? In tonight’s File on 4 we investigate three cases in which foster parents have come into conflict with social workers. They find themselves in a Kafkaesque world of closed doors, whispered innuendo and calls that go unanswered, where the council holds all the cards.

BROOK: They’re all-powerful. What they say goes, and it’s a very difficult shell to penetrate. That outer shell that they put up against people.

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ACTUALITY: LISA WITH HER CHILDREN

CHILD: I did it properly ...

BOY: You know today I had a driving lesson?

LISA: Yes.

BOY: Best reverse left I've ever done.

LISA: Wa-hey. Then you can drive me around.

BOY: Yeah, I'm moving out before that.

CUFFE: It's a weekday evening and Lisa has lured her children away from their computers and the TV for a chat by the fire. As well as looking after three teenagers and an adopted daughter, she's opened her spacious home to foster some of Derbyshire's most vulnerable children.

LISA: I was a stay at home mum and it gave a sense of purpose. I've specialised, if you like, in drugs, alcohol and injury babies. It's being their mum without being a mum I think is the easiest way to put it. You're looking after them, you're getting up with them at night, you're feeding, clothing, everything that a parent would do for the child ,but without that maternal attachment, I suppose, because they're not yours.

CUFFE: She'd been doing the job ten years when she took in a baby boy who'd been injured and was often sickly. She had to take him for contact with his birth mother three times a week and was worried about the state he was in at the end of each visit. But when she raised the matter with social workers, they dismissed her concerns. Foster parents undergo regular assessments, and when she'd had the baby for eight months, the regional Fostering Panel reported that he was developing well and she was providing "an excellent level of care". Yet a fortnight later, out of the blue, Derbyshire Social Services announced they were coming to take him away.

LISA: It was a real shock to the system and to all my support system of carers. No one had ever known it before.

CUFFE: You obviously asked for an explanation?

LISA: Yeah. I didn't get one. They completely closed ranks.

CHILD: I was sat in the lounge, trying to hold on to him and they just came and took him out of the arms and just left without letting us say goodbye or anything.

BOY: You couldn't ask them why. It was literally one, two, three, over.

CHILD: It shook us up.

BOY: Losing a family member.

CUFFE: Did it really make such a difference to you? I mean, this was one child. You are used to children moving on. Why was this different?

LISA: This was almost like a bereavement, because the child was there and then had gone, so you'd got no way of inputting information to anybody. It was extremely hard, extremely hard. And then also on the other side, you kind of feel dirty because you know that in the background they must be thinking something of you, but you don't know what.

CUFFE: Used to picking up the phone for a chat with social workers, Lisa now found her calls weren't answered, messages and emails were ignored. The baby was removed in November, but it wasn't till January that she got a letter from the council, explaining that they felt the matching between her, the boy and his natural family was not working. The real sting was in the final paragraph:

READER IN STUDIO: We have been advised by some health professionals that they have significant concerns about your behaviour with specific regard to your care of the baby. I am unable to provide you with more details until we have an accurate picture of what is being said, but as a result of these concerns I need to inform you that, until our investigations are completed, we will not be asking you to take any further placements.

CUFFE: Threatened with the loss of the job she loved, Lisa wasn't sure where to turn. If the bureaucrats wouldn't deal with her directly, perhaps they'd take notice of her solicitor, Paul Brook.

BROOK: She was very very upset. I therefore wrote to the County Council. I followed that up with monthly letters and received no response, no satisfactory response. They just ignored the first three or four letters, which were quite detailed and quite lengthy. It took threats of possible judicial review or defamation proceedings to make them give any sort of reply at all. Eventually they replied, a shortish letter saying that we are dealing with it in the department, and that's the attitude they've got. It was their pigeon and nobody else should interfere in their decision making process.

CUFFE: As a solicitor you must be very used to dealing with local authorities and public bodies. What did you think about the way Derbyshire behaved in this case?

BROOK: Well, I think Derbyshire behaved unprofessionally by not replying to correspondence, unprofessionally by not supplying information. As regards Lisa herself, I think they had got a couldn't care less attitude towards her. They are all-powerful, what they say goes and it is a very difficult shell to penetrate, that outer shell that they put up against people.

CUFFE: Five months after the baby was removed from her care, Paul Brook and Lisa attended a meeting with Derbyshire Social Services Department. They were told of concerns about the number of times she brought the baby and her own adopted daughter to the doctors. The possibility of fabricated or induced illnesses was mentioned.

LISA: They started to say that they felt that I'd accessed the GPs too often. As a foster carer you obviously have to keep your back covered really, but also, I mean he had ear infections, and at the GPs obviously you go, they diagnose it, you get antibiotics and they say, "Come back in ten days and we'll see if its cleared," so for one illness you're getting two visits. But the GPs don't write that down on any notes, 'asked to come back in ten days' - it just looks more than it is.

CUFFE: So those were very serious allegations made about you, that you overreacted, there was a hint here of Munchausens by Proxy Syndrome?

LISA: That's what they were picking up on, more or less, that I was making up the fact that he was ill, even though I'd got other carers who had witnessed it.

CUFFE: Lisa wanted to know where these allegations were coming from and what other things people were saying about her, but she wasn't allowed to see her file. She had to use data protection regulations to force the authority to release it – and what she read astonished her.

LISA: There was so much wrong. I mean, one of the things that sticks out specifically for me is my youngest daughters accesses CAMS, the mental health body, and Social Services had written that CAMS had concerns over me and my daughter. When I argued it with them and said, 'You never told me that,' they said, 'No, you've missed out the word no, we had no concerns over her.' The more information I got, the more I read, the more I was able to fight and argue that was just wrong. Everybody that they'd said they'd got evidence from, I'd disproved it. Everybody had said they'd been misrepresented, which is why I got a full apology. I got a full retraction of everything that they said, but it did take three years.

CUFFE: With a clean bill of health, Lisa decided to return to fostering, and last year a baby of just under a day old was placed in her care. To be on the safe side, she logged everything that happened, sending details to Derbyshire Social Services. But she feels their attitude towards her remained hostile. While she was on holiday in August, the baby went to a respite placement. Social workers then announced he wouldn't be

CUFFE cont: returned to her care and no more children would be placed with her. She was called to Derbyshire's fostering panel and on Christmas Eve a letter arrived saying that the main reason was that social workers couldn't work with her.

LISA: I'm once again persona non grata with everybody. I'd expected to be told what a bad carer I was or them to level something at me that I wasn't aware of, but in fact they didn't. All they said was they felt that the social workers couldn't work with me, so they couldn't renew my fostering contract because of the department, which is very hard because you don't have an argument then, because it's not like you've done something wrong and you can change to work with someone. It's them that can't work with you.

CUFFE: Did you ever think, well perhaps I had the wrong attitude towards Social Services? Perhaps I was over-zealous or too critical or, you know, do you think that there was anything wrong in what you did as a foster mum?

LISA: No, nothing, nothing at all, because I did everything I should have done. There's nothing I would change of what I did.

CUFFE: We invited Derbyshire County Council to be interviewed, but they declined. In a written statement, they tell us their fostering service has been inspected and rated as good. They say:

READER IN STUDIO: Whilst we accept that we have made some mistakes along the way, we do believe that, overall, the decisions we have taken are the right ones and in the best interests of the children involved. Where mistakes have been made, we have learned from them and we have changed some of our procedures so they don't happen again.

LISA: There's an awful lot of children out there and they could have done with keeping someone that is actually experienced at looking after the child.

CUFFE: And do you miss it now?

LISA: I miss a lot of it. I don't miss the aggravation of it, but I do miss the caring for the children. I loved what I did and I was good at what I did.

CUFFE: The number of children in the care system in England and Wales has gone up 10% this financial year, reaching an all-time record. Foster homes are needed for 59,000 children, and just before Christmas the Fostering Network made headlines by announcing a national shortage. Its chief executive is Robert Tapsfield.

TAPSFIELD: We know that over the next twelve months fostering services need to recruit another nine thousand foster carers throughout the UK, and that's really just to keep track of the foster carers who will be leaving. Local authorities do have to take very seriously their responsibility towards their foster carers. When there are allegations and concerns, the ways that these are managed and investigated often still falls short of what is expected and indeed what is required by the regulations. What should happen – but doesn't always happen – is that foster carers are fully informed as soon as possible about the nature and extent of any allegation or concern. Children shouldn't always be removed and there are expectations that investigations will be dealt with speedily and matters resolved. We do know that that, however, doesn't happen often enough and there are certainly occasions where foster carers feel just left in the lurch and very concerned often about the child who's been removed from them.

CUFFE: It's not just campaigners who are concerned about the way foster carers are managed. Lord Laming is a former Chief Inspector of Social Care Services and the author of two major reports on child protection. After leading the public inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié, he followed up on his recommendations by delivering a progress report.

LAMING: It seems to me that if the state is going to rely upon foster parents to be a substitute parent, then the state has both a legal and a moral responsibility to make sure that foster parents are valued, properly prepared for the task and adequately supported in what is a very very challenging activity. I have seen examples of wonderful work, but I have also seen the other side of the coin, which is of the process that was intended to be good turning out to be destructive. We must be determined to make sure

CUFFE: This was a huge commitment. I mean, what made you take on that commitment?

SIMON: It was the guarantees that they offered to us – don't worry about anything, everything will be put in place, you will be fully supported. We'd be both on full carers' allowance and the professionals that's needed to help you along to do this, and that's what really convinced us – it was a professional organisation run by the council and it makes you be quite firm to make them decisions to start the job really.

CUFFE: The youngest child – a little girl - came to live with them and they waited for her brothers to join her. They had the boys for overnight stays and took all four children on regular outings, but no word came about their long term future. And because Lorraine had given up her job and Simon had run down his business – at the council's request – they were beginning to get into debt. Calderdale treated them as kinship carers and gave them the lowest possible weekly rate.

SIMON: We got £78. Now taking into consideration there's three of us own children, it was just impossible to run a household and feed that many people on a £78 allowance, it was just impossible. So we was asking, you know, for some extra support. It was then said to us that we will have a look into that. It were another month went on, nothing really got done about it, it was trying to be pushed under the carpet. We was borrowing money from some family members, and that's when they said, 'Well, they can come and take the little girl from you if you can't financially support them.' We was getting letters coming through the door then that we hadn't paid us council tax. It was the council that had really – or a certain department within the council – that had put us in that position. Totally different story really than what had first been given to us.

CUFFE: The next body blow was when they realised that vital information about the children's behaviour had been withheld from them. It came to light when the boys were staying overnight and they went to a fostering workshop, leaving Lorraine's mother in charge.

LORRAINE: When my mum came into the living room after making a cup of tea and found the children in the positions that they were, it raised every alarm bell for her. When on our return my mum obviously shared that with us, she was very distraught, she felt that she had failed, that if she had not left the room it would have been prevented, and I said to my mum, 'Mum, this wasn't shared with us, what could we do if we'd not known about it?'

CUFFE: The couple were dismayed to think that because of Calderdale's oversight they'd unwittingly put the children at risk. They added it to a list of complaints they lodged with the council, who took four months to come back with their findings. All ten complaints were upheld in full and the council admitted the foster family had not been treated well or in a manner they had a right to expect from the social work team. Extraordinarily, though, the social work team weren't even told about their complaints, so not surprisingly nothing changed. Lorraine and Simon took matters further and over a year later, an independent Complaints Review Panel concluded:

READER IN STUDIO: There were serious mistakes made and there were deficiencies in social work practice which had significant adverse consequences for them and the children.

CUFFE: The panel recommended that the local authority should reimburse them for their legal costs and a principal officer should liaise regularly to listen to them, monitor social work practice and resolve problems. But the council wasn't obliged to do what was recommended and the couple say, if anything, things got worse.

LORRAINE: When we took out the complaints, that's when all doors were shut, barriers came up.

SIMON: And we felt as though, you know, that it was now getting very personal towards us, and they weren't helping us, they were trying to make it really difficult for us to continue. They just didn't want to work with us, because they didn't want it looking into and investigating.

CUFFE: Stonewalled by the social workers who were supposed to support them, the couple sought legal advice. They wanted to be made party to court proceedings concerning the children, so they could find out what was going on. A children and family lawyer, Ruth Coneron represented them.

CONERON: This case was to me a text book case on how not to conduct care proceedings. The judge got very impatient with it all. At the end of the case, in fact, the judge expressed his view that the local authority had not conducted itself properly throughout the proceedings. In relation to one of the children, in fact, the judge refused to accept the care plan of the local authority and adjourned the proceedings in relation to that child because he was not satisfied that Lorraine and Simon had been given the opportunity that they should have been given to show that they could care for this child.

CUFFE: Under pressure from the court, in the autumn of 2010, Calderdale finally agreed that the youngest brother should move in with Lorraine and Simon. The court-appointed guardian stipulated that the child needed therapeutic work for his sexually harmful behaviour, and the family might also need extra support. To give them a vital break, he insisted they should have one day's respite a month. But despite frequent requests to Social Services, the couple say this help wasn't forthcoming. By now, Simon was trying to restart his business, so the bulk of care fell to Lorraine. After fifteen months, everything suddenly fell apart.

SIMON: They was playing outside in the garden and my wife had come in to make tea, I was doing work, and about five minutes later you'd just gone to go check on them because it had gone quiet outside and the little girl came running up saying, 'It wasn't me, it wasn't me,' and pulling her pants up basically. Immediately my wife knew what had really gone on. The little girl had said then that her brother had been asking her to have sex and perform different acts, which was devastating to us then really because we should have been able to be monitoring them all the time, but because of the position really that we'd been put in, it was really impossible to keep an eye on them every second of the day.

CUFFE: The couple realised that unless Social Services gave them the support they'd promised, they'd have to let the boy go. It was a heartbreaking decision, made worse when they learned that he had three different foster placements in quick succession.

SIMON: We'd like the little boy back to be with his sister and this help and support put in place, and that's really what we're fighting for now really, because they're now saying "No, we're now trying to find another permanent placement for him." But he had one here and he had it for fifteen months. And if they'd given the help and support that was identified right at the beginning, he would still be here.

LORRAINE: He was a lost, absolutely lost little boy, very scared. Any mum, parent will know when I say his eyes were dark. There were nothing in his eyes. And within fifteen months, from a little boy who you can't cuddle because he can't accept them, touch – he shudders and cringes. But when he comes to you for that brief second and he just puts his arm around you, it's absolutely priceless. You see him coming shining through, you go into school and his reports, they're coming on, he's proud of his work, where fifteen months prior, he couldn't care less. He'd say himself, 'I'm rubbish, I can't do this,' and you know what you're doing is good. And you want to carry on because you want to rebuild this little boy.

CUFFE: Calderdale turned down our request for an interview and issued the following brief statement:

READER IN STUDIO: The safety and welfare of all our looked after children is paramount and it is essential that confidentiality is maintained at all times. For this reason, Calderdale Council never discusses individual cases relating to looked after children.

CUFFE: To recoup their financial losses, Simon and Lorraine sued Calderdale Council and received a settlement of £57,500. Their MP, Craig Whittaker, was formerly a Calderdale councillor and portfolio holder for Children's Services.

WHITTAKER: This case is an extreme case but sadly it's not an unusual case. One would think and one would hope that when a local authority has paid out substantial sums of money to put right a scenario, they would learn the lessons of that. In this case, without question I know that those lessons have not been learned.

CUFFE: And this family are left not knowing where to turn.

WHITTAKER: What's happened to this family is just totally unacceptable and I would ask the local authority to have a proper inquiry into what has gone wrong, because I think the normal forms of complaint and cajoling and speaking and communication are just falling down. I think the council need to do a proper, full inquiry and an agreement from the Chief Executive of Calderdale that whatever the outcomes of that inquiry, that's what will be put in place.

CUFFE: Unable to question Calderdale Council, we put the details of what had happened to Matt Dunkley of the Association of Directors of Children's Services. He insisted he couldn't comment on the specifics of the case, but explained what local authorities should do in similar circumstances.

DUNKLEY: People should be clear what will happen if the placement happens and what will happen if it doesn't, and sometimes people will have to take risks about whether they give up their job in anticipation of receiving a placement and then the placement never comes, but those risks should be clear to everyone in advance.

CUFFE: Important information about the children's background was also withheld from this family, it involved sexualised behaviour, and this eventually could have put one of the children and any visiting children at risk.

DUNKLEY: I am very surprised if there are circumstances where important information about the needs of the child are withheld from the foster carer. There are sometimes safeguarding reasons why certain information can only be shared at a certain point, but good practice is that all the relevant information about the child is shared with the carer so that they know. I mean, they are the professionals dealing with the needs of this child in the home environment, so just as a social worker would need that information, we

CUFFE: Michael was born with a genetic disorder, leading to problems with his spine and a reduced life expectancy. He's also got severe learning disabilities. Anne became his foster mother when he was four. We've changed both their names to protect his identity.

ANNE: Children's Social Services phoned me and told me there was a little boy that needed respite and could I see if I could manage him. So I went to the school and as soon as I seen him, God he had these big brown eyes and long hair and these boots on and he was walking round and I said yeah, that is not a problem. And he come straight over and sat on my knee.

CUFFE: So you bonded straight away really?

ANNE: Mmm, straight away, yeah.

CUFFE: It wasn't long before Anne became his full time foster parent. Then, when Michael turned eighteen, he became the responsibility of Manchester's Adult Services Department and she needed to be assessed again as his long term carer. The placement officer reported that he was really happy and was treated as one of the family. There were one or two occasions when Michael had fits of aggression and Anne reported these to the social worker, but the bond between the two of them was as strong as ever. Then in April 2009, when they'd just come back from holiday, his new social worker rang to say the school had made a 'safeguarding adults' referral back in February which had to be investigated and police had been contacted.

ANNE: Then I got a phone call saying, "Get Michael ready for respite, he's going his respite," so I said, "We have just packed up to go to Wales," because we went to Wales every weekend in the caravan, so she said, "Well, get him used to going to respite, he is going to respite for a few days." I said, "Because of these allegations?" So she said, "We can't tell you." I said, "Where are you taking him?" Total strangers they left him with, total strangers. So [sighs and cries]

CUFFE: Michael was reported to have said something about sleeping in the wardrobe and 'don't lock the door' but after questioning Anne, police decided not to take the matter any further. The local authority, however, held two meetings - she wasn't invited to either - and decided that Michael should remain in residential care while the allegation was investigated.

ANNE: I don't think he said it for one minute, because he doesn't talk like that. What Michael does is he repeats everything you say. If I said to him, "I am getting you a new wardrobe tomorrow," he would have just said, "Wardrobe, wardrobe, wardrobe." He would have said cupboard, he would have said it, but it doesn't mean to say he's been locked in it.

CUFFE: It was a very serious allegation that you might have been harming Michael, so wasn't it really a reasonable thing for the local authority to do, simply to remove him from harm's way?

ANNE: No I don't think so. I think they went about it the wrong way. What they should have done is they should have interviewed me beforehand, knowing that I was an excellent foster mother from Children's Services, so what they should have done, they should have spoke to me and asked me did I do this, did I do that.

CUFFE: Michael's birth sister says she never doubted Anne for one minute. She has nothing but praise for the quality of her care.

ALICE: The first time I seen Michael after he had been removed, I was horrified, absolutely horrified. When he was in Anne's care he was always clean, happy, always looked well and when I seen him the first time he looked dishevelled. It was like somebody took him away from himself, because he'd only ever known Anne and her family and me and to take him away from that world – they literally took him away as well. He just didn't seem the same Michael he used to be.

CUFFE: Nine months after his removal from home, the safeguarding adults investigation concluded that it wasn't clear whether any abuse had occurred or - if it had - by whom. But instead of letting Michael go home to Anne, the local

CUFFE cont: authority decided that it was in his best interests to stay in the residential unit and they barred her from visiting him. Since going there, his behaviour had deteriorated and he'd been put on strong psychiatric drugs to keep him calm. Acting on instructions from Michael's sister, Mark McGee – a lawyer who specialises in human rights and community care - took the case to the Court of Protection.

MCGEE: Arbitrary. Absolutely arbitrary. He was taken away from his home, he was taken away from his mother and he was taken away from his mother by a public authority that acted unlawfully. That is not in a modern society in any way acceptable. We had to go to court and we basically had to go through a bloodbath which did terrible damage to Anne and in turn Michael's sister, and we had to deal with that and we had to try and assist them through that process, and it was very very stressful.

CUFFE: The Court of Protection ruled that the council had acted unlawfully in depriving Michael of his liberty and right to a family life. The Judge said their errors were grave and serious. He criticised the fact that they hadn't involved Anne in decisions about Michael's care and found that there had been:

READER IN STUDIO: A deplorable failure to take into account the close relationship, the need to sustain that relationship, and a consequent failure to arrange any contact for several months between this vulnerable young man and the person who had been his carer – his mother figure – for most of his life.

CUFFE: There was a delay in getting Michael back home while the court waited for his psychiatric report, but Anne was free to see him for the first time in about six months.

ANNE: Oh, it was absolutely wonderful, absolutely wonderful. He just come walking round the corner and I was already sat there waiting for him and just put my arms round him and it was just [sobs]

CUFFE: An emotional moment?

ANNE: Very. Yeah.

CUFFE: Did he say anything about what had happened?

ANNE: No, no, he doesn't understand at all and didn't understand.

CUFFE: How did he seem to you?

ANNE: He seemed very withdrawn. Not only that, they had put a nappy on him, which he doesn't have nappies, I couldn't believe it. We just sat and talked and held each other's hands.

CUFFE: Mark McGee says the judgement is particularly important because it recognises that over a period of time, a foster carer can become so integral to an individual's wellbeing that to all intents and purposes she takes over the parental role. But he didn't revel in his victory.

MCGEE: It wasn't elation because, you know, this case should never in a million years have got off the ground, and I wasn't proud about setting some nice little legal principle and all the rest of it. Hundreds of thousands of pounds could have been avoided if Manchester City Council would have acted lawfully. But, more importantly, this family would have had an extra year together.

CUFFE: Do you think that there are lessons here for the City Council, for other foster parents?

MCGEE: Individuals who work within in this arena are involved in very difficult and very sensitive situations. The onus on them in terms of their knowledge and understanding of the law and the time that they probably need to spend with families and everyone else is much higher than it probably would normally be. Spend the time, investigate, make the decision. If it is against the family, that's fine as long as you can justify it. But for crying out loud, don't make decisions arbitrarily or on the spur of the moment because you are playing with people's lives and families' lives. That's not fair.

CUFFE: We wanted to interview Manchester City Council, but they said they were unable to take part in the programme because of continuing legal action – Michael is suing them for compensation. Instead, they referred us to an earlier statement by their Director of Adult Services:

READER IN STUDIO: Serious concerns were raised about this young man's welfare and we had an obligation to act. While we strongly believe we did the right thing, the judge has made it clear that we went about it the wrong way. We regret this and have now put in place measures so that in future similar cases we will follow the correct procedures.

CUFFE: At a time when local authorities are crying out for foster carers, it's ironic that some are driving good carers away. A point we put to Matt Dunkley of the Association of Directors of Children's Services. Does it upset you to hear of cases where clearly foster parents in different parts of the country have been failed by the system and the work that they do has not been valued?

DUNKLEY: Well, it always saddens me if I hear that foster carers feel that their work isn't valued. But in the great majority of cases it goes right and we need to judge by what happens in the majority, not in the minority.

CUFFE: It really does seem, in the cases we've looked at, that the local authority, who have huge powers, have abused those powers.

DUNKLEY: What I'm sure does sometimes happen is, people make mistakes, there are different views about what's best for the child. That doesn't make it abuse of power. If there was evidence of systematic abuse of power by local authorities across the country, it would have been picked up by the very tight and intense regulatory inspection framework that we have.

CUFFE: No one can know how many foster parents are bruised by their encounter with the local authority or how many children get caught up in the conflict between them. It takes a brave carer to speak out. Eileen Munro, a professor at the London School of Economics, has carried out a major review of child protection, trying to find out why previous well-intentioned reforms have failed to deliver significant improvements. She

CUFFE cont: is now waiting for the Government to implement her recommendations. One of her conclusions is that social work practice needs to be more child-centred and professionals should be freed from red tape to concentrate on the human relationships that are at the heart of their work. We asked her to look at the cases of our foster parents.

MUNRO: It's very distressing to hear what happened in these cases. And that failure to do the very basic conversations with the people involved, but just to go straight into the bureaucratic response of 'there has been an allegation therefore we remove the child' is something that I have heard of in other cases. In the case with the 18 year old boy, it seems to me that by moving him out very quickly, they covered their own back. They made it clear that they could not be blamed for any harm that came to him. Whereas if you'd started to think about what's in his best interest with this very stable relationship, then you could well have reached a different decision, but that means that if he had stayed there and something had happened to him, they would be afraid of criticism.

CUFFE: But of course if a child's life is at risk, you've got to have processes and procedures in place, haven't you?

MUNRO: I totally agree that you need some procedures, but what can happen is that if people are in a very defensive compliance culture, they're very scared of saying they made a mistake and then they become more and more defensive and aggressive in refusing to look again at the judgement they made. You do end up with many agencies starting to protect themselves from risk more than the children from risk.

SIGNATURE TUNE