

ANZSOG Case Program

ChildProtect: an agency under fire (A)

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ChildProtect (Jeugdbescherming in Dutch), the agency helping vulnerable children in Amsterdam, was in desperate need of help itself. Every year it looked after 10,000 children at risk, working with families and partner organisations to provide them with safe and supportive environments. However, in 2009 the government bodies overseeing ChildProtect placed it under heightened supervision. They felt the agency was unable to fulfil its core mission tasks: assessing the risks posed to vulnerable children, providing timely help where required, working effectively with the families of children, and controlling its own organisation and finances.

Following the resignation of his predecessor, Erik Gerritsen was appointed as the new chief executive in 2009. He found a hard-working agency and youth care system full of good intentions, but in desperate need of results and ideas. As Gerritsen observed: 'Qualified professionals and committed politicians tried their very best to help children in need. But that doesn't work if the system itself is broken.'¹ To save ChildProtect and make a difference to the children in need, Gerritsen would have to navigate complex interactions with the politicians overseeing the agency, the partner organisations working with the agency, and his own professionals delivering care for clients.

The child protection system in the Netherlands

ChildProtect is one of a network of child protection agencies in the Netherlands that aim to provide children at risk with safe and supportive care environments. The families involved are often characterised by financial distress, physical and emotional abuse, substance addiction, and brushes with the law. Because of the multiple disadvantages of these families, a myriad of organisations was usually involved in the care process.

This case has been written by Dr Scott Douglas, Utrecht University, the Netherlands. It has been prepared as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The assistance of Erik Gerritsen and Marc Dinkgreve of the child protection agency for the greater Amsterdam area is acknowledged, as are the suggestions of John Alford, Paul 't Hart and Karin Geuijen.

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¹ Coret, M. (2014). 'De bedoeling weer centraal: Hoe JBRA 65 procent verspilling ontdekte.' [Putting the purpose centre-stage: How JBRA discovered 65% waste], *Management Executive*, Sep/Oct, pp 36-39.

Children – minors between the ages 0-18 – were usually referred to the agency by teachers, police officers, doctors or other professionals who assessed they may be at risk of abuse or negligence.² Parents could choose to accept the help of the agency voluntarily, or the case might be referred to the child investigation council who could seek a court order to place the child under care of the state.

Other children, such as those with a suspended sentence imposed for an offence, were referred to the agency as part of their parole program. In each situation, a range of welfare organisations could then be mobilised to care for the children and support the families, including foster homes, parental support groups and mental health services (*Exhibit 1*).

Child protection agencies report to sub-national governments in the Netherlands, either a province or regional authority. Working in the greater Amsterdam area, ChildProtect reported to a regional authority made up of delegates from sixteen local councils: the city of Amsterdam with a population of more than 800,000, and fifteen neighbouring cities and towns with a total of 700,000 inhabitants. Ultimate responsibility for youth care in the region rested with the mayors and aldermen of these local governments. Regional authorities are funded by the national government, receiving contributions from the Ministries of Justice and Health. In addition, the network of organisations involved in child protection are supervised by the National Inspectorates for Youth Care and Justice.

In the years prior to Gerritsen's appointment, the Netherlands had been shocked repeatedly by the tragic deaths of children in state care. Most prominent was the case of three year old Savanna, who was found murdered in the boot of her mother's car in 2004.³ A dozen social workers had been monitoring the family, but despite a number of worrying reports, no one intervened. Eventually, Savanna's mother and stepfather were convicted of the murder. The legal guardian of Savanna, working for an organisation unconnected to ChildProtect, was prosecuted for gross negligence, and although acquitted was reprimanded by the presiding judge for negligence.⁴

Tragedies such as these led to calls for better agency accountability and cooperation. Under intense media and political scrutiny, child protection agencies across the country started to devote much more time and effort to documenting all their interactions with the families of children under care. At the same time as demanding more security for children, the national government was rolling out budget cuts across the public sector as a consequence of the 2008 global financial crisis.

ChildProtect

ChildProtect comprised 600 professionals working with 10,000 children every year. It was financed through a variety of public funds, receiving money from either the national, regional and local government depending on the type of care it was providing to the child in question. Faced with unpredictable revenue streams and high costs, the agency had been running a deficit for the past several years (*Exhibit 2*).

The professionals at ChildProtect were split across three roles: social workers who referred children to other services; guardians who had the legal responsibility for children under state care; and parole officers who worked with juvenile offenders. At any one time, a social worker would be responsible for around 60 children, a guardian 18 children, and a parole officer 22 children (*Exhibit 3*). The different professional groups worked in separate teams, with their team managers mainly focussing on the size of their case load and their capacity for taking on a new case.

² The organisations employing these professionals are required by law to have reporting protocols in place, but the reporting of suspected abuse is not mandatory in the Netherlands.

³ Kuijvenhoven, T. and Kortleven, W. J. (2010), 'Inquiries into fatal child abuse in the Netherlands: a source of improvement?' *British Journal of Social Work*, 40 (4), pp 1152-1173.

⁴ Salm, H. 'Applaus na vrijspraak van gezinsvoogd Savanna'. [Applause after acquittal guardian Savanna] *Trouw*, 17 November 2007.

A typical intervention (*Exhibit 4*) would start with a report from a concerned teacher or doctor that a child was at risk of abuse or neglect. A social worker would visit the child and refer the family to other support services such as parental coaching. If the circumstances of the child worsened, for instance if evidence of physical abuse emerged, the child protection services would seek a court order to place the child under state care. The social worker would hand over the case to a legal guardian also working at the agency, who would assess again what measures might keep the child safe. Guardians could choose to work with the parents or remove the child to a foster home. At the same time, one of the older children in the family may have fallen foul of the law, and so one of the agency's parole officers might also start working with the family. This meant that one family could see several case workers from the same agency at the same time, each of whom would be fully occupied meeting with each other and tracking their actions in extensive case reports. Added to this, it was usual practice to reassign each worker every year. Having up to 20 different social workers in four years was 'normal'.

A mounting crisis

Over the course of 2008, the Regional Authority of Amsterdam, the Youth Care Inspectorate and the agency's own employees had grown increasingly concerned about the management of ChildProtect. Regional politicians criticised the agency for not providing timely care, giving the example that over a hundred children had to wait more than two weeks after they were first reported to the agency. The Youth Care Inspectorate found the agency unable to provide adequate risk management for children who entered the system, as case workers did not systematically check whether those children were safe in their family situation.⁵ Furthermore, the employee council of ChildProtect passed a motion of no confidence in the previous chief executive, citing his inability to control the organisation and its finances (*Exhibit 5*). He resigned in 2008.

At the beginning of 2009, both the Youth Care Inspectorate and regional authority took several actions to address the sense of crisis at the agency. The Inspectorate demanded immediate steps be taken to improve risk management. The regional authority issued a directive, requiring the agency to change its current client processes and to focus on its growing waiting lists.

It was in this context that Erik Gerritsen's appointment took effect. In his previous role, Gerritsen was the highest ranking civil servant in the city of Amsterdam. Together with politicians, partner organisations and professionals he would have to turn the agency around very rapidly.

Working with politicians

Politicians with responsibility for the agency held office at regional and national levels. Shortly after his appointment as chief executive, Gerritsen was called in to meet with the regional alderman responsible for youth care. The alderman immediately demanded a timeline for improvement to the waiting list for care, which was getting almost saturation media coverage.⁶ Gerritsen declined however to provide a concrete timeline for reducing the waiting list, arguing that the new management was not yet in control of the organisation and any work estimate would be guesswork.

Gerritsen also had his own demands. He drew on independent sources to calculate that it would take about €8 million to repair and rebuild the agency, with the money needed to address not only the waiting lists but also retraining and reorganising his personnel. In turn, the alderman declined to commit funds outright and upfront, fearing that the agency was not able to use the additional money properly. After lengthy negotiations, the alderman agreed to release the money in tranches over time; this made it hard to roll out any grand scheme for improvement at the agency. Gerritsen then

⁵ Youth Care Inspectorate, *Risicomanagement in de jeugdbescherming van Bureau Jeugdzorg Agglomeratie Amsterdam* [Risk management in the child protection agency of the Amsterdam Region, 15 October 2008].

⁶ No author, 'Wachtljst jeugdzorg Amsterdam niet helemaal weg [Waiting lists at child protection Amsterdam not completely gone]'. *NRC Handelsblad*, 13 October 2009.

took the unusual step of publishing an open letter to the regional authority and all local politicians, arguing that ChildProtect was not able to guarantee the safety of the children in care without extra funds from the government.

Working with partner organisations

When taking care of children, ChildProtect was highly dependent on the cooperation of other organisations to provide foster homes for children, support for the parents, or specialist mental health services. All of these organisations worked with their own protocols and methods, often causing friction between their respective employees. Moreover, these organisations were also facing financial pressures, making them extra wary of taking on complex or poorly reimbursed cases.

In the past the partner organisations had met periodically to streamline their cooperation. In his previous role as Amsterdam city manager, Gerritsen had regularly brought the agencies together to review multi-problem families who required a range of different services. However, beyond individual cases and good intentions, these interactions seemed to provide little structural improvement. The joint meeting process fell away after Gerritsen left local government, and the different partners returned to fending for themselves in a complex system.

Working with professionals

To improve the performance of the agency, Gerritsen also had to work with the professionals actually delivering care. The primary tool for steering case workers was caseload management. Agency standards prescribed how many children a social worker, guardian or parole officer should manage. In practice, many children were formally under supervision of the agency, but the case worker would focus on the children at highest risk and only passively monitor the others. Often, as a consequence, the situation of the 'lower-risk' children deteriorated over time, generating the need for more specialised services downstream. Another practice found was repeatedly using approaches, already known to be ineffective, with the same family. Eventually, lengthy and expensive interventions would be needed. Both time and cost could have been saved if an initially more expensive, but appropriate and effective, program had been introduced earlier.

Case workers spent a lot of time complying with prescribed protocols and preparing extensive case reports, many of which ballooned to be more than a hundred pages.⁷ On the whole, the professionals spent up to sixteen hours per week reporting on their clients, rather than actually delivering case management services.⁸ When Gerritsen asked professionals why they filled out all of these reports, they told him the protocols demanded it; however, no such specific instructions could be found. Rather, as one case worker later commented, 'I think it [the report] gave me a feeling of security, and the feeling that I have done my job well'.⁹

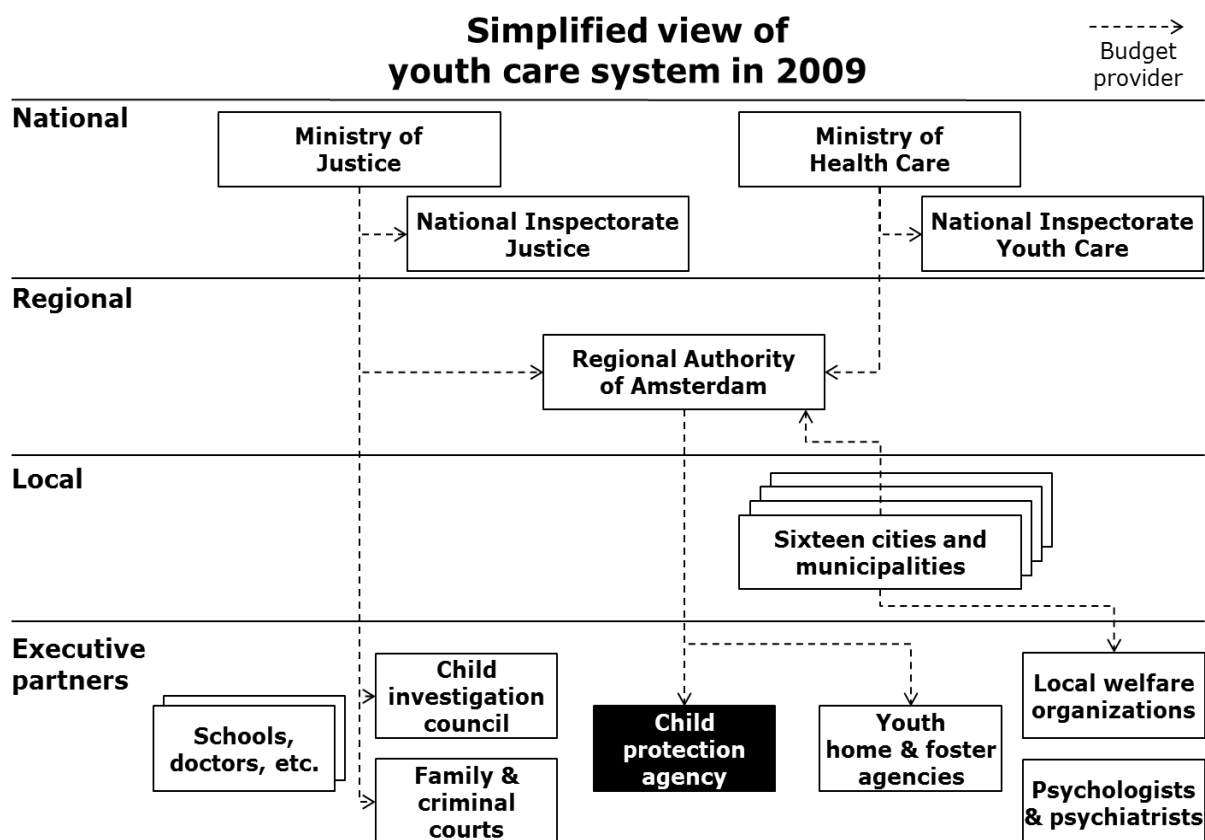
Gerritsen and the other managers at ChildProtect were keen to liberate the professionals from administrative burden, but their assurances were not readily trusted. In one conversation with a seasoned case worker, Gerritsen proposed to scrap the case report altogether, promising to provide 'cover' if the worker got into trouble for not being able to account precisely what she did for each child. She countered that it may appear to be a good intention today, but that such a promise would not help her if there was a different chief executive tomorrow. After all, the previous chief executive was forced to resign because of the poor performance of the agency. She then looked at the director for a moment and asked: 'And how long do you intend to stay in this job?'

⁷ Steenmeijer, J. (2012). 'Het roer om in Amsterdam.' [Changing course in Amsterdam] *SOZIO*, Issue 105, April, p. 46.

⁸ Repetur, L. and Prakken, J. (2013). *We praten niet meer óver maar mét gezinnen* [We no longer talk about but with families]. Report by Nederlands Jeugd Instituut/the Netherlands Youth Institute, October.

⁹ Steenmeijer (2012), op.cit, p 46.

Exhibit 1 Simplified view of the youth care system in the region of Amsterdam



Not included: Health care insurers pay for doctors and most of the mental health service. Ministry of Education finances schools and truancy programmes.

Source: Prepared by the author

Exhibit 2 Key figures of agency end-of-year 2008

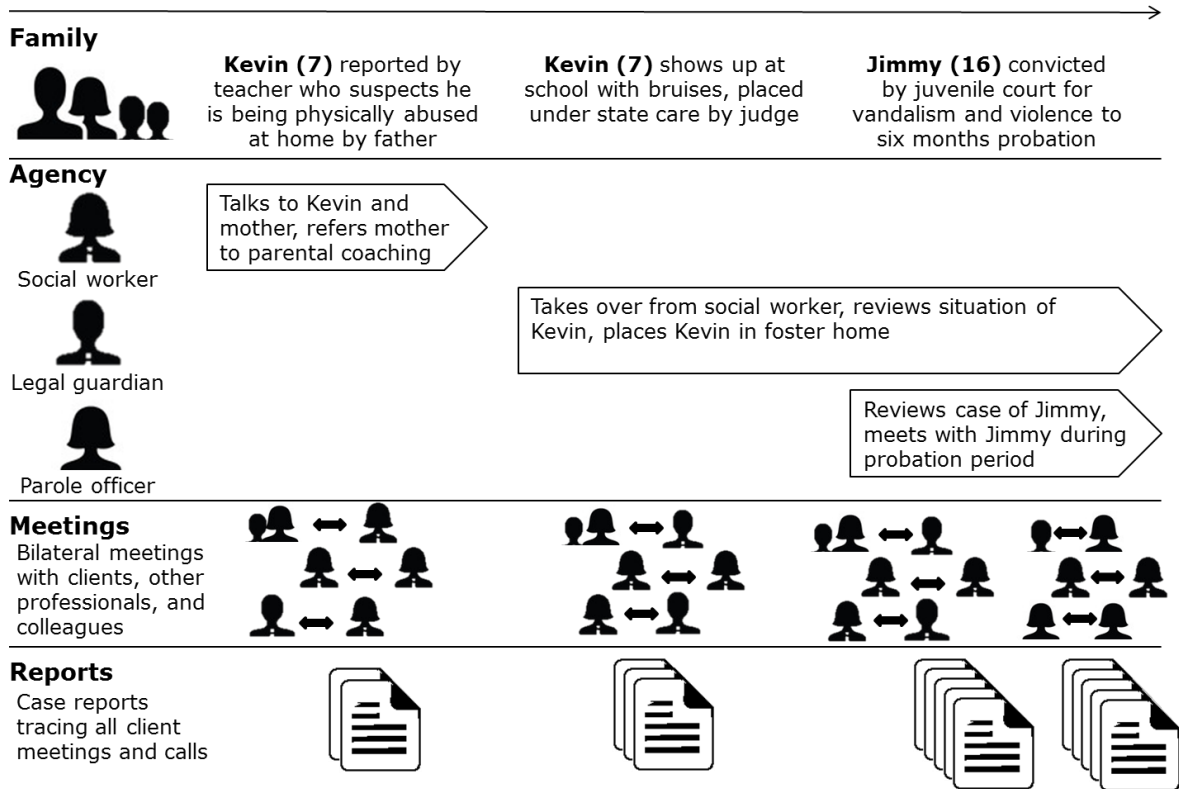
Key figures	
Professionals (total)	600 FTE
Sick leave	8-9%
Expenditure	€53 m
End of year result	€-2.3 m

Source: BJAA Annual Report 2008*

* BJAA is the former name of the ChildProtect agency

Exhibit 3 Example of an agency intervention in 2009

Example family journey in 2009



Source: Prepared by the author

Exhibit 4 *Key indicators for professionals*

Professional	Average case load	Costs per child p/y
Social workers	60 children	€3.500
Guardians	18 children	€7.000
Parole officers	22 children	€5.200

Source: Estimates from ChildProtect agency management, 2015

Exhibit 5 Performance of agency end-of-year 2008

Indicator	Performance target for 2008	Actual performance for 2008
Start child abuse investigations	100% of investigations should start within 5 days of initial report	44% of investigations start within 5 days of initial report
Conclude child abuse investigations	100% of investigations should be completed within 13 weeks	50% of investigations completed within 13 weeks
Meet new clients after initial report	100% of all clients have a meeting with the agency within 2 weeks	88% of all clients meet with a case worker within 2 weeks
Draft youth care plan for clients	All clients should have a clear care plan within 63 days	Clients wait 78 days on average for care plan
Client satisfaction (2009)	N/A	5.8/10

Source: BJAA Annual Report 2008, 2009*

* BJAA is the former name of the ChildProtect agency