

# ANZSOG Case Program

## ChildProtect: an agency under fire (B)

2016-173.2

In his first two years as chief executive of ChildProtect, the child protection agency covering Amsterdam and its environs, Erik Gerritsen focused on the basics: gaining control of the budget and reducing the waiting lists. However, he remained uneasy about the agency's ability to truly help its clients in the most effective way. Most service and financial indicators had improved only modestly over the past two years. Keeping children safe would take more than incremental changes to existing business processes. Gerritsen and his management team had to devise a whole new strategy for creating value in these circumstances.

### Reshaping interactions with professionals

In 2011, ChildProtect and its stakeholders enshrined an aspiration to keep 'Every child safe' as the primary goal of the organisation. Instead of pursuing this goal through a top-down change program, the chief executive and his team opted to devolve the next step to the professionals. A core group of ten case workers was given free rein to redesign the care process, along with a powerful mandate to cut away anything which did not contribute to keeping children safe. Along with a consultant trained in the Vanguard Method, an application of Toyota Lean Thinking to the service industry, this group examined each process step, asking each time: 'What has been the added value for the client of this email, of this meeting, of this annotation in the case report?'.<sup>1</sup>

By eliminating superfluous steps, the core group designed a new method for providing child protection. This was based on a set of basic principles, key among which was that one case worker would be responsible for one entire family in order to help make their own plan. This meant that a

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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<sup>1</sup> Steenmeijer, J. (2012). 'Het roer om in Amsterdam.' [Changing course in Amsterdam] *SOZIO*, Issue 105, April, p. 45.

case worker brought into the family to report on the oldest brother would also make sure that the younger children were safe, and vice versa. As well as saving money by limiting the number of case workers active in any one family, the agency increased its ability to pre-emptively detect and help children at risk at an early stage with tailor-made services.

The core group also abolished the lengthy case report per child. In their assessment, more information was not necessarily value-adding information: the report could be replaced with a consistent plan based on the strengths of the family as a system, and holding only the most essential information. The old habit of journaling all kind of unnecessary information was banned. The group argued that a case worker needed only to be able to answer two questions at any given time: Is the child safe right now? Do we know what the next step should be for this family to keep the child(ren) safe?

In this new method, at first family members, then their social network and later all partner organisations were brought together, literally into the same room, to discuss what was best for all the children in the family (*Exhibit 1*). This connected the case worker to other professionals, but also to extended family members who could potentially be of assistance. The tools and techniques the case worker needed for this task were adapted from the Functional Family Parole Service, as developed by the Washington State Parole Services in 2002.<sup>2</sup> The care process also became more transparent for the parents, as one mother commented:

When I was dealing with the agency because of my eldest son a couple of years ago, I never knew what you guys were scheming behind my back. Everything is now very different when working on the problems for my youngest child. I am involved with everything, I know what is happening and why.<sup>3</sup>

Gerritsen and the other managers supported the suggestions made by the core group. However, when the core group presented their plans to the rest of ChildProtect, their professional colleagues vigorously opposed the changes on the basis that existing protocols were indispensable to child protection. The high level of hostility convinced the management team that these professionals would have to experience change for themselves before they were persuaded. The members of the core group were therefore divided across the organisation and paired with new teams of 6-8 case workers. Each group again went through the current care process and asked what steps added value or not. Every group came to the same conclusion, that many steps in the current process could be eliminated. It took 18 months to take this experience to all 40 teams. To anchor the method into the organisation, weekly reflection was introduced as well as reflective team audits and external audits, both conducted annually.

Although the professionals were in the lead, management did still play an important part in the new focus on value. The change was not purely top-down, but neither was it purely bottom-up. At the beginning of the transformation, the management team was constantly putting the value question to the professionals. For example, Gerritsen was working with two case workers one day to find the funding required for placing a child in a new foster organisation. At the end of the meeting, he asked why the child had to move to a new home in the first place. The case workers replied that the child was progressing very well, but that existing procedures required the child be moved to a new home. He reminded them: 'If the child is doing fine, we should keep him there, and it is my job to make the procedures work for you.' Towards the end of the transformation, professional staff were seeking out the maximum value solution themselves, only alerting management when they ran into issues that stopped them from realising the best possible scenario for the child.

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<sup>2</sup> The FFPS pioneered the use of 'functional family therapy' which targets interventions at both at-risk children *and* their families, with the aim of decreasing risk factors and increasing protective factors: Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, <https://www.dshs.wa.gov/ra/juvenile-rehabilitation/functional-family-therapy-washington-state>.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

## Reshaping interactions with politicians

Making these changes inside the agency did require support from politicians outside the agency. When Gerritsen requested extra funding in previous years, he had emphasised the threat posed to the children under care if ChildProtect remained under-resourced. This argument had only limited impact, and only portions of the required funding levels were ever released. From 2011 onwards, Gerritsen reframed the case to politicians: the agency now emphasised that the extra money would allow it to invest in innovation, which would save money in the long run. This approach seemed to resonate more with the politicians involved.

The chief executive also needed moral support from politicians to make what were quite radical changes to traditional approaches to child protection. Ideally, the agency would need some leeway for learning – mistakes were expected while the care process was effectively re-engineered. However, there was very little room for experimentation, as the politicians were anxious to avoid the type of tragedies (such as avoidable child deaths) that had occurred in the past. Gerritsen resolved to be consistently transparent about everything ChildProtect did and changed. He organised external audits by consultancies, site visits from partner organisations, round tables with clients, and many meetings with politicians. Staff presented their new method at conferences and seminars, frequently sharing information online and in print media.

Periodically the tensions between ChildProtect and the governments it reported to still ran high, especially during negotiations over the budget, but on the whole relationships improved. The regional authority and the Youth Care Inspectorate, which had in 2009 put ChildProtect on notice, relaxed their extra supervision of the agency. The regional authority worked in tandem with the agency to lobby the national government for extra money for specific projects, although the agency remained perilously close to bankruptcy for several years. When the amount of legally-enforced child care cases started to go down, particularly as parents now welcomed the help of the agency, politicians started paying more attention. Finally, a national minister agreed (on the basis of a fund matching arrangement with the regional authority) to provide ChildProtect with the final instalment of funding to complete the change program.

## Creating more value for children and families

The results of ChildProtect started to improve dramatically from 2011 onwards. Reflecting on the period preceding the changes, board member Sigrid van de Poel commented that ‘we were moving mountains of work at the agency, but our clients were deriving very little benefit from it’.<sup>4</sup> The new process refocused all the resources of the agency on creating value. One case worker would now look after an entire family and would focus on mobilising all the partner organisations and family members involved. This was enabled by eliminating all administrative processes that were judged not to help this effort. As a consequence, the costs of taking care of an *entire family* in 2014 were now only marginally higher than taking care of just *one child* in 2011 (*Exhibit 2*).

Other important indicators were also moving in the right direction (*Exhibit 3*). Client satisfaction rose from 58% to 75%, as family members came to appreciate the newly proactive and transparent approach of the agency. The new focus on early intervention had a significant impact on the outcomes being achieved. The number of cases where legal instruments had to be used to compel parents to cooperate was reduced by 50%, and the number of children being removed from families decreased by 60%. Importantly, ChildProtect markedly improved its response capacity to any new reports of children at risk.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 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.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The changes resulted in cost-savings of around €12 million within the agency, realised mostly by eliminating unnecessary internal processes. A further €10 million was saved for the child protection system as a whole, as the agency was able to decrease the number of clients it had to refer to specialist services. While other child protection agencies across the country struggled with budget cuts, ChildProtect delivered a balanced budget. At the same time, sick leave amongst case workers was reduced from 8-9% in 2009 to 6% in 2013. Local politicians started to praise the agency publicly, and it was awarded Best Public Sector Organisation of the Netherlands by a select committee of government experts in 2015.

## Remaining challenges with professionals, partners, politicians

Although the new approach yielded many improvements, new challenges emerged and some old problems remained. The new method was now familiar to all professionals, but not all of them applied the new principles consistently, often falling back into old routines. They returned to tracking all their actions in lengthy dossiers or drawing up plans without consulting the entire family. The management did not want to reinstitute a system to check the behaviour of the professionals, as that would undermine ownership of the value creation. Yet they struggled to find a way to sustain the focus of professionals on value creation without reverting to bureaucratic checks.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, even when their own professionals did adhere to the new principles, they often ran into resistance from their counterparts at partner organisations. 'All my clients have my mobile number, they can reach me anytime', one family worker said. 'But I was recently working with a foster care provider who did not want to give even me her mobile number, let alone her clients.'<sup>7</sup> The youth care professionals may have transformed their own methods, but they still had to deal with the less responsive routines operating in their partner organisations. Unless these partners could change their products or protocols to allow for more tailor-made solutions, the improvements achieved in ChildProtect would not necessarily deliver the best results for clients.

The programmes and financial incentives of the different partner organisations remained misaligned, and there was no mechanism to resolve issues blocking value creation at the network level. Ideally, professionals both inside and outside ChildProtect would almost instinctively provide immediate feedback if the agency was not living up to its own promises. However, partner organisations did not immediately report problems to ChildProtect, letting problems within the network go unnoticed.

Gerritsen had tried to pull partner organisations together at the senior level for a joint improvement programme, but failed to build an effective alliance as their interests were simply too different. The agency therefore still relied on the help of politicians. As the ultimate coordinators and financiers of the system, they could potentially bring all the partners together. However, the elected aldermen seemed reluctant to take this role. Managerial leadership seemed to have played its part, but it was unclear what Gerritsen could do to foster stronger political leadership.

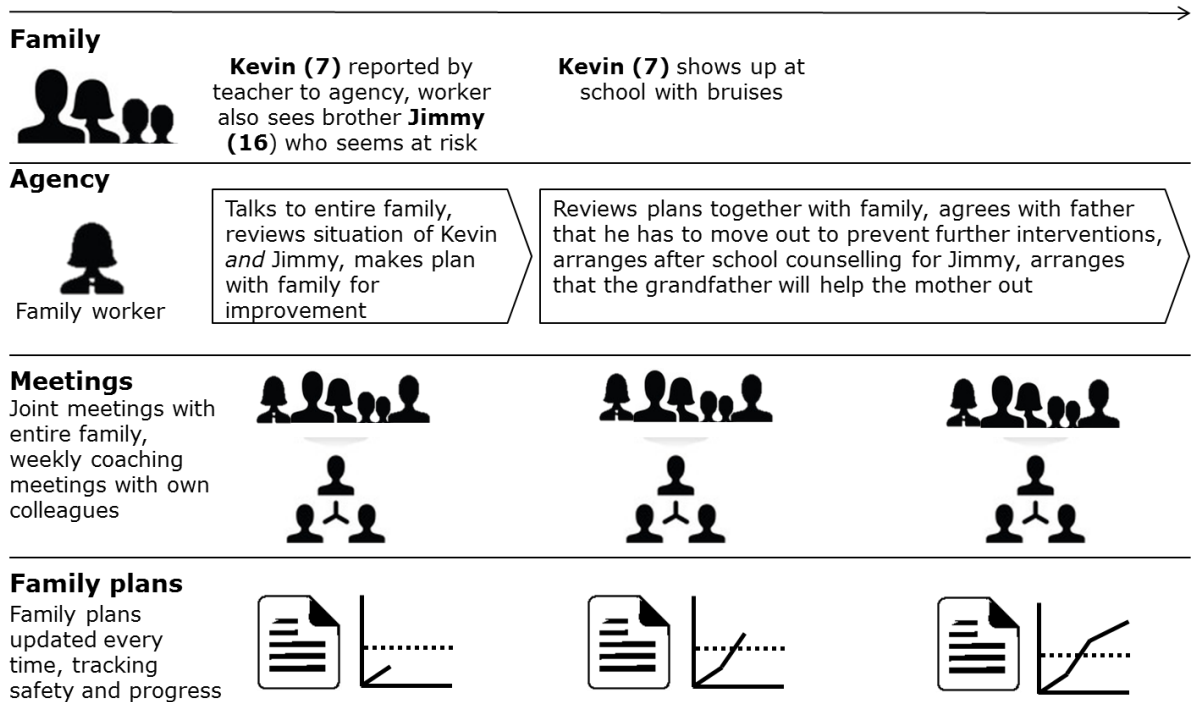
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<sup>6</sup> Athena Institute, (2014), *Leren, internaliseren en verankeren van Generiek Gezinsgericht Werken bij Bureau Jeugdzorg Agglomeratie Amsterdam* [Learning, internalising and anchoring Family Oriented Work at the Child Protection Agency in Amsterdam], Athena Instituut, January.

<sup>7</sup> Repetur and Prakken (2013), op.cit.

Exhibit 1 Example progress of safety line and central (case progress) line

**Example family journey in 2014**



Source: Prepared by the author

## Exhibit 2 Key indicators for professionals

Professional	Average case load	Costs per child (often several cases per family)	Costs per family (including all children in the family)
Situation before 2011			
Social workers	60 children	€4.000	N/A
Guardians	16 children	€8.000	N/A
Parole officers	22 children	€7.000	N/A
Situation after 2011			
Family workers	14 families	N/A	€8.750

Source: Estimates from ChildProtect agency management, 2015

### Exhibit 3 Key figures of agency end-of-year 2014

Key figures	2009	2014
Professionals (total)	~600 FTE	~500 FTE
Cases	~10.000 children	~7.000 children
Sick leave	9%	6%
Expenditure	€53 m	€33 m
End of year result	€-2.3 m	€1.2 m

Source: BJAA Annual Report 2014\*

\* BJAA is the former name of the ChildProtect agency