



COMMENT

Society is caught in a family justice malaise **Sarah Richardson**

Sir James Munby, president of the family division of the High Court, recently described the family justice system as being "at full stretch" and facing a clear and imminent crisis.

"Everyone is working as hard as they can," he said. "We are facing a crisis and, truth be told, we have no very clear strategy for meeting the crisis."

That warning followed another record month for care applications - in the past 10 years the number going through the courts has doubled and 2016-17 already looks to be another record year.

But why? I have worked as a family justice lawyer for the past 12 years and have watched all those around me strive for better practices for children, better results for children and safer lives for children. And yet the number of care applications rises.

Sir James says research is urgently needed to identify the reasons for the rising care cases; and I suggest the causes come from a crisis within our communities.

In the recent years, families have had to battle increasingly hard to survive in a society that often appears to offer little, if any, support, and not always at the right time. In the past, if a mother consulted me after social workers had raised concerns about her parenting abilities, I could refer her to more than one local

support group, charity or voluntary organisation to offer her and her children assistance.

Slowly over the years, those organisations have disappeared, funding has been withdrawn and communities have become more insular. There no longer appears to be a community spirit in which families are assisted by one another; it seems much more to be a struggle for individuals to meet the basic needs of their children without any support.

Could one of the answers to Sir James's question be that local authorities are having to apply to court as a last resort when families have reached crisis point? Only at that stage is some of the support and basic assistance offered to families – help that could have been offered long before these families ended up in the family justice system.

It is a sad indictment of our society that we are not able to offer as a community the basic early intervention that families need to avoid the state having to intervene through the courts. Perhaps government needs to be looking more widely than the family justice system to see why so many more families have ended up in that situation.

Sarah Richardson is a partner in the children and education law team at Russell-Cooke, a London law firm

Sarah Richardson

Partner

+44 (0)20 8541 2004

Sarah.Richardson@russell-cooke.co.uk

www.russell-cooke.co.uk