

## *AUTHOR'S REPLY TO EILEEN MUNRO*

James Mansell  
Senior Analyst, Decision Support  
Child, Youth and Family  
Ministry of Social Development

I appreciate and agree with Eileen Munro's response to my paper. The biggest challenge is not in developing the understanding and technical ability to measure and manage the risk-screening trade-off, it is in applying these tools in an emotionally charged and thus difficult social context. Indeed, developing this understanding from within a child protection agency has illustrated well the challenge of balancing the application of system thinking models and technical measures while sitting alongside social workers facing an intractable daily dilemma between doing too much and not enough.

As I note in the article, but perhaps do not stress enough, increased transparency about our risk-screening performance will not *in itself* stop unfair criticism or completely stabilise the intervention threshold. I do believe, however, that the current lack of transparency does more to drive unfair criticism than it serves social workers who are undertaking these difficult screening decisions. By making the trade-off explicit, there is at least a chance to place the debate on a more rational footing, and some chance to mitigate the risk that policy is made on sentinel events rather than on a full understanding of the outcomes for the majority of children.

In some sense I'm suggesting becoming *more* transparent in the face of criticism rather than giving in to the natural tendency to close shop and join in the parade by promising the impossible or criticising social workers for not achieving it. Using and redirecting criticism to engage critics with the real issues may be overly optimistic but, given the reactive and destabilising alternatives, it is worth consideration.

Eileen Munro's response is a timely reminder that there is a delicate process to build understanding and develop a language and measures that can support the difficult task that child protection social workers face every day – and do so in a way that will not provide further ammunition for criticism.