

SECTION 10: SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN IN SPECIFIC CIRCUMSTANCES

SECTION 10.12: ORGANISED ABUSE

10.12.1 DEFINITION

Complex (organised or multiple) abuse may be defined as abuse involving one or more abusers and a number of children; they may be using an institutional framework or position of authority to recruit children for abuse.

It reflects, to a greater or lesser extent, an element of organisation on the part of the adult/s involved and may involve:

- Aspects of ritual to aid or conceal the abuse of children;
- Child sexual abuse networks where adults plan and develop social contacts with children for the purpose of gaining access to them in order to abuse them;
- The production of child abuse images or abuse of children through sexual abuse and / or sexual exploitation;
- Abuse in residential homes, boarding schools or other institutions;
- Adult/s who seek contact with children for improper reasons through leisure or welfare organisations;
- Adults seeking to contact children via electronic means such as internet or mobile telephones.

In the cases of suspected institutional abuse needs to be read together with that on professional abuse and other relevant sections.

10.12.2 GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Each complex abuse investigation requires thorough planning, good inter-agency working, and attention to the welfare needs of the child/ren who have been harmed. The various agencies involved in a complex abuse investigation should be committed to working together in partnership to ensure that relevant information is shared and that appropriate action is taken to minimise the risk posed by alleged offenders to children and vulnerable adults.

Cases of organised abuse are often highly complex because of the number of children involved, the serious nature of the allegations of abuse, the need for therapeutic input and the complex and time consuming nature of any consequent legal proceedings.

Such cases usually require the formation of dedicated teams of professionals from the police and local authority or Independent Enquiry and Assessment Service (IEAS), NSPCC for the purpose of the investigation.

In all investigations of organised abuse, it is essential that staff involved maintain a high level of confidentiality in relation to the information in their possession without jeopardising the investigation or the welfare of the children involved. Subsequent information generated throughout the investigation should only be shared on a 'need to know' basis.

.The protection of any children identified as being at risk of harm remains paramount, but the sharing of information and confidentiality issues should be treated with due consideration for the alleged offender. Agencies should take appropriate practicable steps to minimise the potential disruption and damage to the alleged offender's private and professional life caused by a protracted investigation, taking place in many cases many years after the alleged offence was committed. Where allegations are subsequently found to be ungrounded, or it can be proven that false or malicious allegations have been made, the needs of the alleged offender should be treated with sensitivity.

RESEARCH AND EXPERIENCE HAVE SHOWN REPEATEDLY THAT KEEPING CHILDREN SAFE FROM HARM REQUIRES PROFESSIONALS AND OTHERS TO SHARE INFORMATION. OFTEN IT IS ONLY WHEN INFORMATION FROM A NUMBER OF SOURCES HAS BEEN SHARED THAT IT BECOMES CLEAR THAT A CHILD IS AT RISK OF, OR IS SUFFERING, HARM. THIS IS ALSO TRUE FOR VULNERABLE ADULT VICTIMS.

Investigation teams should have visible support from the top ranks in the police and LA children's social care and other agencies throughout the inquiry. This requires the involvement of senior personnel, at least at Commander and Assistant Director / Head of Service level in a central strategic management group. It is for each agency to determine their representative. These individuals must be empowered with full decision-making authority (e.g. in the allocation of resources).

Relationships with LSCBs

An investigation of organised abuse will be carried out under the auspices of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, which should be kept informed of its progress. It should be the role of the strategic management group to liaise regularly with the LSCB. However, the LSCB should not take any direct role in the management of the inquiry.

10.12.3 SETTING UP AN INVESTIGATION

Professionals suspecting organised abuse should immediately consult their manager who will be responsible for liaising with the Service Manager, Safeguarding Children Unit and/ or the Police Family Support Team.

Responsibility for co-ordinating the investigation of organised abuse rests initially with the Service Manager based in the Children's Social Care Safeguarding Children Unit. When the Service Manager of the Safeguarding Children Unit receives information about the possibility of organised or institutional child abuse they will :

- Liaise with Senior Managers in Children's Social Care and Greater Manchester Police and any other relevant agency i.e. Health or Education.
- Convene a multi-agency Strategy Meeting/ Discussion with relevant senior and operational managers within the working day that the referral is received.

1 The strategy meeting / discussion must:

- Assess the information known to date;
 - Decide what further information is required at this stage;
 - Arrange for the gathering of all relevant information;
 - Establish whether and to what extent complex abuse has been uncovered;
 - Undertake an initial mapping exercise to determine the scale of the investigation and possible individuals implicated;
 - Consider a plan for the investigation to be presented to the management and resources strategy group, including resource implications;
 - Consider any immediate protective action required. The first consideration is whether any immediate action needs to be taken to ensure that no child is left at risk of significant harm and how this can be achieved in a way which is consistent with the conduct of the criminal investigation,
- The strategy meeting / discussion may include the referrer, if appropriate, a legal adviser and anyone else relevant to the meeting.
 - Having considered and discussed the information, those persons must, if in their view the suspicion gives reasonable cause to suspect complex abuse, pass the information on to the Director of Children's Services.

10.12.4 Senior Officers' Steering Group

When it is clear that an investigation into organised or multiple abuse needs to be mounted, Senior Officers from Children's Social Care, the Police and other relevant agencies should establish a Steering Group which is responsible for:

- The strategic planning of the investigation
- The terms of reference and the scope of the investigation
- Ensuring that the appropriate resources are deployed
- Ensuring that the staff are supported, as much of the work will be difficult and distressing
- Handling the political and media issues arising from the investigation
- Ensuring that the investigating team will have full access to records and individuals that hold important information.

Role of the Steering Group

The role of the steering group is to:

- Bring together a trusted and vetted team from Police and Children’s Social Care. It is essential to ensure independence and objectivity on the part of this Joint Investigation team.
- Agree terms of reference and ways of working.
- Agree clear written protocols for recording and sharing information.
- Make a thorough assessment of victim’s needs and provide or access services to meet these needs.
- Secure access to expert legal advice.
- Ensure the availability of consultants/experts to support interviewing teams.
- Ensure that records are safely and securely stored.
- Use weekly strategic planning meetings to consider the conduct of the investigation, next steps and the effectiveness of joint working.
- Provide a confidential and independent counselling service for victims and families. In particular, the team will need to consider how to maximise support and co-operation from ‘safe’ family members and to minimise the trauma to children as much as possible.
- Arrange care and support for those involved with the investigation, including administrative staff. Refer to the appropriate Staff Care Scheme/ Occupational Health or other resources as appropriate.
- Consider the use of an external consultant to debrief team, in particular after traumatic situations, or at the end of the investigation.
- The Senior Investigating Officer should have an operational media strategy in place from the commencement of the investigation.

10.12.5 Joint investigation team responsibilities

The joint investigation team, supervised by the Senior Officers’ Steering group, is responsible for:

- Planning the overall investigation, involving record checking, evidence gathering, planning and undertaking a series of interrelated interviews and surveillance if required;
- Considering the implications of crossing geographical boundaries;
- Holding planning meetings for individual pieces of work (e.g. video interview of a child and / or to protect a child);
- Gathering other evidence including forensic evidence, interviews with alleged abusers, witnesses and other corroborative evidence;
- Communication and liaison with other agencies on a need to know basis;
- Convening interagency meetings and / or child protection conferences as appropriate;
- Co-ordination and timing of therapeutic services;
- Regularly updating the Senior Officers’ Steering Group on the progress made and recommending when to close the investigation;

- Consideration of arrangements for court hearings and support to children and families;
- Recommendations as to the placement of children and any contact involving children and their siblings, relatives or other adults.

10.12.7 Specific considerations for the management of Case Conferences

Organised abuse investigations create considerable difficulties for both the management and chairing of case conferences.

The management of the investigation and any ongoing allegations need to be kept separate from the conference process, so that conferences on children involved in organised abuse can focus exclusively on the protection needs of the child or sibling group involved. Groups of unrelated children should not be the subject of case conferences.

Professionals should only be invited to conferences because of the information they are able to provide about the specific child and family. Under current procedures parents can be excluded from case conferences where investigations are still continuing and it may well be appropriate to invoke this exclusion in cases of organised abuse. However where investigations are complete, then as far as possible, normal procedures should apply and parents should be invited in the normal way.

The decision about whether to hold a case conference and whom to invite should be made by the lead members of the Steering Group, i.e. Police or Children's Social Care.

10.12.8 ACCESS TO RECORDS

One of the most difficult issues in complex abuse investigations relates to the tracing, use, management and disclosure of documentary information relevant to the investigation. The investigative team should consider what information is required and where it is likely to be and take immediate steps to secure it within each agency. The investigative team will also need to access a variety of records during the investigative process.

10.12.9 INFORMATION SHARING

Child abuse investigations rely critically on sensitive or highly confidential information being made available to investigators. Agencies should refer to the Stockport LSCB Information Sharing protocol. All members of the investigation team should be aware of, understand and observe the protocol. It is vital to establish clear understandings about the rules governing disclosure of information to members of the investigating team and those colleagues and supervisors who require access to the information, who must be regarded as forming a circle of confidentiality. Consideration should also be given to the use of confidentiality agreements with regard to individuals employed to undertake the investigation.

10.12.10 CLOSURE AND REVIEW OF INVESTIGATION

Where closing a case, the following tasks should be completed as appropriate:

- Obtain final list of indictments (Protection of Children Act 1999);
- Inform all complainants / witnesses of the result of the case;
- Inform all relevant agencies of the result of the case;
- Agree procedure for dealing with victims who identify themselves at a later date and / or victims who remember things after the event;
- Consider the need to offer continuing support to all witnesses, child victims and their families who have been in contact with the investigation;

Cases where the alleged perpetrator cannot be traced should only be closed on the authority of the Senior Investigating Officer, in consultation with a senior representative from the relevant LA children's social care department. The same authority is required for the disposal of cases where the alleged perpetrator has been traced but the CPS has decided not to proceed on the grounds of insufficient evidence or public interest.

All agencies should review the investigation once it is completed. The review should highlight any policies, procedures or discipline processes which need changing for the various agencies. The LSCB may already have conducted a serious case review (although in some cases this may not be completed until the conclusion of court proceedings). It is good practice to conclude all major investigations with an overview report to the LSCB highlighting the prime activities and findings of the inquiry with recommendations for future inter-agency learning. This may lead to both inter-agency and individual agency action plans which will be monitored by the LSCB.

Records to be maintained and file storage

The Code of Practice made under the Criminal Procedure and Investigations Act 1996 sets out the minimum requirements for record retention in all criminal cases and defines action to be taken by the police in the context of retention and disclosure of material held by third parties. It is considered good practice to maintain a central registry and file storage facility for all cases that come within this guidance. The holding agency should ensure that all documents and files used and / or generated in the process of an investigation are retained securely.

Agencies involved in such cases have differing requirements and are subject to a variety of regulatory and voluntary file retention periods. It is also necessary to cater for the production of material in connection with civil actions and the Freedom of Information Act. It is recommended that, against the various needs of agencies, all original files be retained for a minimum period of six years from the date of the completion of the investigation (whether or not proceedings are instituted) in consideration of the fact that information contained in these files may be required in subsequent criminal and / or civil proceedings. Such material may also be relevant as supporting evidence for compensation claims to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority. Certain material may be relevant to subsequent

investigations and / or enforcement action by a regulatory body such as the National Care Standards Commission.