

NORTH EAST LINCOLNSHIRE SAFEGUARDING CHILDREN PARTNERSHIP  
**ORGANISED AND COMPLEX ABUSE**

## SCOPE

This chapter provides a procedure for agencies about the investigation of complex and organised abuse and information about what action they should take if they suspect such abuse. All agencies, including those from the voluntary and community sector, who may be asked to contribute to complex abuse investigations, need to ensure that they follow this procedure. Registration authorities should also adhere to this procedure in cases where continuing registration of a setting may be affected by the investigation.

For further guidance see also **Complex Child Abuse Investigations: Inter-Agency Issues, HO & DH 2002**

These procedures must be implemented in conjunction with the procedures on abuse by those working with children where appropriate see Allegations against Staff or Volunteers Procedure.

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## 1. DEFINITION

Complex and organised abuse may be defined as Abuse involving one or more abusers and a number of related or non-related abused children. The adults concerned may be acting in concert to abuse children, sometimes acting in isolation or may be using an institutional framework or position of authority to recruit children for abuse. Such abuse can occur both as part of a network of abuse across a family or community and within institutions such as residential settings, boarding schools, in day care and in other provisions such as youth services, sports clubs, faith groups and voluntary groups. There will also be cases of children being abused via the use of electronic devices, such as mobile phones, computers, games consoles etcetera of which may be accessed via the internet and or social media.

Although in most cases of complex and organised abuse the abuser(s) is an adult, it is also possible for children / young people to be the perpetrators of such harm, with or without adult abusers.

The complexity of abuse is heightened where, as in historical cases, the alleged victims may no longer be living in the setting where the abuse is alleged to have occurred. Where for instance the abuse is alleged to have taken place in an institutional setting, it may be the case that neither the victims nor the alleged perpetrators are still involved with that setting or professionals in the same employment.

## 2. INVESTIGATION

Each investigation of complex and organised abuse will be different, according to the characteristics of each situation and the scale and complexity of the investigation. But all will require thorough planning, collaborative inter-agency working and attention to the welfare and protection needs of the child victim/s involved is paramount.

Where a professional becomes concerned that a case may meet the definition of 'complex', the professional must inform Child Protection Managers and the PVPU Dedicated Decision Maker immediately. A strategy meeting must be held with clear time scales set (see Section 5, Referral).

The investigation of complex abuse requires specialist skills from both police and social work staff which usually involves the formation of dedicated teams of professionals and will need consideration of the needs for victims for therapeutic services. The consequent legal proceedings may add to the timescales of such investigations.

Some investigations become extremely complex because of the number of places and people involved, and the timescale over which abuse is alleged to have occurred. In these circumstances a specialist Investigation Management Group (see Section 7, The Investigation Management Group), as well as a Strategic Management Group (see Section 6, The Strategic Management Group) may be set up.

The complexity is heightened where, as in historical cases, the alleged victims are no longer living in the setting where the incidents occurred or where the alleged perpetrators are also no longer linked to the setting or employment role. These will all need to be taken into consideration when working with a child.

A senior Police Officer may convene a Gold Group if a particular investigation merits senior oversight from a police perspective. Police may invite senior members of staff from all agencies, so that information can be shared and strategy agreed. It is not the remit of the Gold Group to direct investigations. These Gold Group meetings are minuted and those minutes will all be revealed to the prosecution, should criminal proceedings be undertaken.

The confidentiality of the information relevant to any Section 47 Enquiry and criminal investigation must be strictly maintained by those involved and must not be disclosed to others, including others within the agency, unless absolutely necessary.

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 must take appropriate practical 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 several 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 must be treated with sensitivity.

## 3. THE CHILD

The single and most important consideration is the safety and well-being of the child or children.

In reconciling the difference between the standard of evidence required for child protection purposes and the standard required for criminal proceedings, emphasis must be given to the protection of the children as the prime consideration.

The investigation and enquiries must also address the racial, religious, cultural, language, sexual orientation and gender needs of the child, together with any special needs of the child arising from illness or disability.

A victim support strategy and protocol should be established at the outset. Support will be required in pre-trial, trial and post-trial periods if the case/s proceed to court. Minimum periods for contact should be established. It is clear

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from experience in research about complex investigations that many victims and families feel strongly that it is important that they remain in contact with the same staff throughout the investigative process.

The scale of the investigation may lead to prolonged periods between the complaint being made and its eventual conclusion. Therefore the correct support is vital for victims/witnesses and contact management plans to be agreed at the onset. This will assist in reducing conflict that could occur between the Police Investigation role, persons involved in such support and the victims/witnesses themselves.

In large-scale complex child abuse cases, there may be merit in setting up dedicated helplines to be available to inquiry subjects, their families and members of the public.

### 4. SUPPORT FOR VICTIMS AND WITNESSES AT COURT

Police Officers may be at court to provide support to witnesses in accordance with the established operation policy, which must take account of the potential for identified Police officers to be called as witnesses.

Witnesses must be kept apart, and in some cases Police officers and victims may also need to be kept apart, to avoid allegations of collusion.

Support for witnesses must be guided by the needs of the witness. The expertise of experienced Victim Support volunteers and Young Witness Service, including those from the Court Witness Service, must be considered in addition to other agencies which may be better able to support particular witnesses (e.g. those with learning difficulties or disability).

Where therapeutic support does take place, it is important that a record of the therapy is maintained so that it can, if appropriate, be made available in the judicial process. In all circumstances, the welfare of the child is the paramount consideration.

Whenever possible, the Court Witness Service should be present in court when each complainant/witness is to give evidence. They should leave the court with the witness after evidence has been given and should then determine with the witness what immediate support they require. The immediate support is to be provided by the Court Witness Service member linked Police officer individually or jointly, or by a counsellor, whichever the witness is most comfortable with.

### 5. REFERRAL

When receiving information or a referral, which may indicate complex and organised abuse, the recipient should immediately refer the matter to the police and a manager in North East Lincolnshire children's social care.

If there is any suspicion that any managers currently employed by a social care agency are implicated or a member of the police, the matter should be referred to the Chair of North East Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children Partnership or in their absence, the Vice-Chair and a Senior Officer within the police. Consideration must also be given to referring the matter to the Local Authority Designated Officer.

### 6. THE STRATEGY MEETING

A Strategy Meeting should be arranged to take place as a matter of urgency to assess the need for future action to be taken and, in particular, whether a criminal investigation should take place.

The Strategy meeting, chaired by a senior manager of North East Lincolnshire children's social care, must take place within **one** working day of the receipt of the referral and be formally recorded. The Safeguarding Children Partnership Business manager must be informed and will inform the Chair of the North East Lincolnshire SCP, if appropriate.

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The nominated senior staff of North East Lincolnshire children's social care and the police from the PVPU should attend the meeting. The meeting will involve senior staff from health, education and other agencies as required and, where necessary, must ensure coordination across local authority boundaries.

The Strategy discussion/meeting must carefully note:

- An assessment of the information known to date:
  - The children named;
  - The children who may be in current contact with possible abusers; ➤  
Children who were, but no longer are, in contact with possible abusers;
  - Possible victims who are now adults.
- Links to other or associated CSE investigations that may be ongoing or CSE victims and or perpetrators that are known to professional and criminal agencies;
- Decide what further information is required at this stage;
- Arrange for gathering and collating the information and identify who will be responsible for specific tasks within specified timescales;
- Establish if / to what extent complex abuse has been uncovered;
- Undertake an initial mapping exercise to determine the scale of the investigation and possible individuals implicated as well as prepare:
  - Witnesses to be interviewed prior to the interviews of children; ➤  
Multiple and simultaneous interviews.
- Consider a plan including resource implications, for investigation to be presented to the management and resources strategy group;
- Consider any immediate protective action required;
- Consider whether there are immediate forensic or evidential factors to be addressed such as removal of computer hardware or accessing mobile telephones etc.
- Consider whether or not there are media implications and what steps may need to be taken to address these;
- Consider whether there are political or public interest implications and what steps may need to be taken in the short term to address these;
- Consider whether other neighbouring or separate local authority areas or police authorities are implicated and need to be informed or involved.

A strategic decision will need to be made by senior managers from the involved agencies as to whether the social work input into the enquiries/investigation can be managed in the conventional way or whether a specialist approach is required for example from a dedicated team outside the service.

This will usually depend on the number, geographical spread and age range of potential interviewees, as well as whether those implicated are foster carers or employees of any member agency.

Where the Strategy Discussion confirms that the investigation will relate to complex and organised abuse, it will appoint a multi-agency Strategic Management Group (see Section 7, The Strategic Management Group) to oversee the process.

Where a member of staff of any agency is implicated in the investigation, his or her line manager must not be a member of the Strategic Management Group.

## 7. THE STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT GROUP

The Strategic Management Group will be chaired by a senior officer in North East Lincolnshire children's social care and will:

- Complete the mapping process started by the Strategy Discussion as set out in Section 5, The Strategy Meeting;
- Establish ownership of the strategic lead in the investigation;
- Decide the terms of reference and accountability for the investigating team, including the parameters and timescales of their enquiries/investigation;
- Bring together a team of people with the necessary training, expertise and objectivity to manage and conduct the criminal investigation and/or Section 47 Enquiry on a day to day basis. NB: Line managers or colleagues of any person implicated in the investigation must not be involved and the involvement of any person from the work place under investigation must be considered with particular care;
- Decide whether there is a need for an independent team to investigate the allegations, for example, the NSPCC, particularly where the alleged perpetrators are foster carers, prospective adopters or members of staff employed by a member agency of the North East Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children Partnership;
- In cases of greater scale and complexity, appoint an Investigation Management Group (IMG) (see Section 7, The Investigation Management Group);
- Ensure that appropriate resources are deployed to the investigation including access to legal and other specialist advice, resources and information;
- Ensure that appropriate resources are available to meet the needs of the children and families or adult survivors, including any specific health issues arising from the abuse;
- Ensure the investigating team are themselves supported with personal counselling if necessary and that issues of staff safety are addressed;
- Ensure that suitable accommodation and administrative support are available for the investigation;
- Ensure that an appropriate venue is available for interviews and the interviews are conducted in accordance with Achieving Best Evidence Guidance;
- Liaise as necessary with the Crown Prosecution Service at an early stage before arranging services for a child in need of counselling or therapeutic help so that the help can be given in a way which is consistent with the conduct of the criminal investigation;
- Agree a communications strategy including the handling of political and media issues, and communication as necessary with the Regulatory Authority;
- Ensure that records are kept safely and securely stored and a high level of confidentiality maintained at all times;
- Hold regular strategic meetings and reviews, which must be recorded, to consider progress, including the effectiveness of the joint working, the need for additional resources and next steps.

Attendees at this group should be of sufficient level within their organisation to allocate and direct resources accordingly.

## 8. THE INVESTIGATION MANAGEMENT GROUP

In cases of considerable complexity and scale, an Investigation Management Group will be appointed.

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Membership of this group should include representatives from North East Lincolnshire children's social care, the police, designated health professionals and the local authorities legal services, with other agencies being invited to participate as appropriate.

The tasks and functions of the Group will be subject to the terms of reference agreed by the Strategic Management Group (SMG), and will include the following:

- To provide a forum where professionals can meet, exchange information and discuss the implementation of the agreed investigation strategy;
- To ensure a consistent strategy for interviewing victims within and outside the councils area;
- To keep the SMG informed of resources and any shortfalls;
- To ensure a consistent and appropriate inter-agency approach to support victims and their families;
- To co-ordinate the inter-agency response to families and provide consistent information;
- To ensure information is shared appropriately with other agencies not represented on the SMG or the IMG;
- To ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities for staff involved in the investigation. Investigators will have full access to all records and key information;
- To ensure that relevant intelligence is passed between agencies and to the police Major Incident Room (MIR).

### **9. END OF ENQUIRY/INVESTIGATION MEETING AND REPORT**

The Waterhouse Inquiry report has noted the importance of adequate referral of information about suspected abusers. It is probable that an investigation will identify individuals who are suspected abusers but against whom prosecutions are not brought. If a suspected abuser is working with children in a child care position, or in the education service, evidence and information should be shared to support disciplinary proceedings and to enable, where appropriate, the referral of suspected abusers to the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) and the relevant regulatory bodies. Consideration must also be given to referring the matter to the Local Authority Designated Officer.

At the conclusion of the enquiry/investigation, the Strategic Management Group must evaluate the investigation, identify the lessons learned and prepare an Overview Report with recommendations and an Action plan for the North East Lincolnshire Safeguarding Children Partnership, highlighting any practices, procedures or policies which may need further attention and require either inter-agency or individual agency action plans.