

Complex (Organised or Multiple) Abuse

1. Definition

Organised or multiple abuse covers circumstances which may involve several abusers and/or a number of children. The abusers concerned may be acting together to abuse a child or children. One or more of the adults involved 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;
- Child abuse images or abuse of children through Child Sexual Exploitation;

Such abuse occurs both as part of a network of abuse across family or community and within institutions such as residential settings, in day care and in other provisions such as youth services, sports clubs and voluntary groups. There may also be case of children being abused via the use of the Internet.

2. General Principles

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

Each investigation of organised or multiple 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, good inter-agency working and attention to the welfare needs of the child victim or adult survivor involved.

Investigating complex abuse is time-consuming and demanding work, requiring specialist skills from both Police and Social Work staff. It is recognised that those who commit sex offences against children often operate across geographical and operational boundaries and the procedure considers the involvement of more than one local authority.

Where an allegation involves a post holder who has a specified role within these procedures, the referral must be reported to an alternative (more senior) manager.

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.

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.

As with all child protection investigations, racial, religious, cultural, language, sexual orientation and gender needs of the child or children, together with any special needs of the child arising from illness or disability must be addressed.

4. Action on Receipt of Information or Referral

Once a referral or a police notification is received an initial Strategy Discussion must be held between the relevant Manager of Children's Services and the Police.

This discussion should:

- Share and assess the information known;
- Consider any immediate protective action required;
- Identify further information required;
- Agree how it will be collected.

A Complex Abuse Strategy Meeting should be convened within **three days (max 72 hours)**.

If there is any suspicion that any alleged abusers work with the children, the matter should be dealt with in accordance with the

5. Complex Abuse Strategy Meeting

All allegations, which may suggest the response under these procedures, should involve the Manager from Children's Services chairing the Strategy Meeting. These meetings are known as Complex Abuse Strategy Meetings.

The following people should be invited to the first Complex Abuse Strategy Meeting:

- Head of Safeguarding
- Manager;
- Local Authority Designated Officer (if within their remit)
- DS/DI of the Police;
- Representative of the Legal Department (if applicable);
- Senior Education representative – Head Teacher and Local Education Officer.

It may also include the referrer, if appropriate, and anyone else relevant to the meeting.

The Strategy Meeting needs to identify:

- Consider if the allegations are extremely serious and complex and thus warrant investigation under these procedures;
- Undertake an initial mapping exercise to determine the scale of the investigation and possible individuals implicated;
- The children named;
- 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;
- Witnesses to be interviewed prior to the interviews of children;
- Multiple and simultaneous interviews;
- Again consider any immediate protective action required.

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 from a dedicated team outside the service, for example the NSPCC.

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 of agency.

Where the Strategy Meeting confirms that the investigation will relate to organised or multiple abuse, it will appoint a multi-agency Strategic Management Group (usually led by the Head of Safeguarding or an AD) 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.

If the Complex Abuse Strategy Meeting decides that the allegations relate to a single individual or institution, it may be that the joint investigation can be managed without the use of a Joint Investigation Management Group and Strategic Management Group.

If so, the investigation will be overseen by ongoing Complex Abuse Strategy Meetings. This decision must be agreed by AD Children's Services and DCI Police.

6. Informing Senior Managers

If having considered the information available, the conclusion of this meeting is that the suspicions are confirmed, the Manager will inform the Head of Safeguarding and lead AD. The DI will inform the Head of Police Public Protection Unit. Each Head of Service should consider alerting their respective Press Officers and an initial joint media strategy agreed, if required.

7. Strategic Management Group

To ensure a coordinated response, a SMG (Strategic Management Group) meeting chaired by the DCI must be convened within 5 working days of the Complex Abuse Strategy Meeting which agreed that these procedures should be adopted.

The membership of the SMG should comprise senior staff able to commit resources. The group is will normally include the following:

- AD Children's Services;
- Police senior investigating officer (usually PPIU DI);
- Lead manager;
- Senior legal adviser (local authority);
- Senior health representative e.g. Consultant Pediatrician / Designated Doctor;
- Police Press officer;
- Other individuals and agencies as appropriate;
- Local Authority Designated Officer if the case involves people working with children.

The terms of reference of the SMG must be set up as specified in the Home Office & Department of Health guidance.

The SMG meeting must agree a plan in line with Appendix A of the above government guidance. An individual must be designated to act as Coordinator between the SMG and the Joint Investigation Management Group identified in the plan - either the Police senior investigating officer or the Children's Services lead manager.

The responsibility of the Coordinator is to manage the Joint Investigation Management Group and prepare a report at the conclusion of the case.

The SMG will:

- Complete the mapping process started by the Strategy Meeting/ Complex Abuse Strategy Meeting;
- Specify the terms of reference for the enquiry/investigation;
- Establish ownership of the strategic lead in the investigation;
- Bring together a trusted and vetted team of people with the necessary training, expertise and objectivity to manage and conduct the criminal investigation and/or Child Protection Assessments 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 workplace 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 West Sussex Safeguarding Children Partnership;
- Decide the terms of reference and accountability for the investigating team, including the parameters and timescales of their enquiries/investigation;
- In cases of greater scale and complexity, appoint an Investigation Management Group (IMG);
- Ensure that appropriate resources are deployed to the investigation including access to legal and other specialist advice, resources and information;
- 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;
- 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;
- 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 is 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.

8. The Joint Investigation Management Group

In cases of exceptional complexity and scale, an Investigation Management Group (IMG) will be appointed.

Membership

This group led by the PPIU senior investigating officer or the Children's Manager, should consist of experienced personnel from PPIU and Children's Services (or an independent agency for social workers).

The size of the group will depend on the scale of the investigation, but in the majority of cases both PPIU and Children's Services should provide a line manager and two staff/officers trained and experienced in interviewing children in accordance with the Achieving Best Evidence Guidance.

Membership may also be drawn as necessary from the appropriate health professionals, in particular Forensic Medical Examiners (FME), pediatricians, psychiatrists, health visitors and from education (head teachers and class teachers), CPS, legal services, probation, victim support services, and the Safeguarding Children Unit.

In selecting staff, consideration should be given to requirements arising from the individual needs of the relevant child or children - e.g. gender, culture, race, language, and where relevant, disability.

Practical Arrangements

The location of the group must take account, both geographically and organisationally, of the need to maintain confidentiality, especially crucial where the investigation concerns staff or carers. Appropriate facilities must be available for video interviews and pediatric assessment. Administrative support, information technology and accommodation requirements must be addressed at the outset, including the storage of confidential records.

Responsibilities

In addition to the information above the Joint Investigation Management Group will also be responsible for:

- Planning the overall investigation involving record checking, evidence gathering, planning and undertaking a series of interrelated interviews and any surveillance required;
- Considering the implications of crossing geographical boundaries;
- Maintenance of written records of regular strategy and operational meetings;
- Holding planning meetings for individual pieces of work e.g. video interview of a child and/or action 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 Multi-Agency Planning Meetings and/or Child Protection Conferences as appropriate;
- Co-ordination and timing of therapeutic services;
- Regularly updating the SMG 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.

9. Crossing Geographical and Operational Boundaries

It may be recognised at the outset or during the investigation that there are suspected or potential victims in more than one geographical area.

At the outset, the responsibility for managing the investigation lies with the Children's Services Assessment Team where the abuse is alleged to have occurred/where the alleged perpetrator(s) are alleged to operate.

Once it is recognised that there are suspected or potential victims in other areas, a joint approach should be made by the SMG to the appropriate Children's Services team(s) and PPIU.

The original joint investigation team should undertake the investigation on behalf of the other geographical areas.

A senior manager from each area should join the initiating SMG to discuss this and agree any resource implications involved.

If the number of victims outside the geographical boundaries of the original joint investigation team increases to the extent that it cannot respond, then a joint investigation team in the new geographic area should be established.

It is essential that there is a joint SMG to provide overall planning. If it is necessary to have more than one joint investigation team, there must be close working between coordinators and processes for full information sharing.

10. End of Enquiry/Investigation Meeting and Report

At the conclusion of the enquiry/investigation, the Strategic Management Group will evaluate the investigation, identify the lessons learned and prepare an overview report for the West Sussex Safeguarding Children Partnership, highlighting any practices, procedures or policies which may need further attention and require either inter-agency or individual agency action plan.

| Review / Contacts / References | |
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