**Complex Strategy Meeting Guidance**



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| **Title:** | **Complex Strategy Meeting Guidance**  **Request for Complex Strategy Meeting Template** |
| **Effective From:** | **22nd November 2022** |
| **Practice Note:** | **The guidance sets out the process for referrals for Complex Strategy Meetings where organised and complex abuse is a concern; and guidance in terms of timescales and key points of consideration within the Complex Strategy Meeting.** |
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| **Date:** | **22nd November 2022** |
| **Review Date:** | **22nd November 2023** |
| **Reference No:** | **0100/2022/CPP** |

**Organised and Complex Abuse**

**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 etc, which all access the Internet.

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.

**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 needs of the child victim/s involved.

The investigation of complex abuse requires specialist skills and dedicated resources 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 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 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 Command meeting 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 a strategy agreed. It is not the remit of the Gold Command meeting to direct investigations. These meetings are minuted and those minutes may 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.

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

**4. Referral**

When receiving information or a referral which may indicate organised or multiple abuse, the recipient should immediately refer the matter to the Police and a Manager in 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 the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership or in their absence, the Vice-Chair and a Senior Officer within the Police.

Where there are allegations against individuals working with children, these should be reported to the Senior Manager identified in the agency's Allegations Against Staff or Volunteers procedure, unless that person is the subject of the allegation, in which case it should be reported to a designated alternative. The Senior Manager should ensure that any allegations are reported to the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO).

**5. The Strategy Meeting**

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

The request for the Strategy Meeting should be put in writing to the Head of Safeguarding using the **Complex Strategy Meeting – Referral Request**, clearly providing an outline of the situation and the risks, along with an outline chronology, genogram, and mapping of the victims and suspected abusers.

The Strategy Meeting, chaired by the Head of Safeguarding, must take place as soon as possible and no later than five working days of the receipt of the referral, and be formally recorded. The Safeguarding Children Partnership Business Manager must be informed and will inform the Independent Chair of the LSCP.

The nominated senior staff of Children's Services and the Police 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 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.
  + Any information stemming from a Return Home Interview.
  + Reference to the Exploitation Screening Tool.
* Social media sites or activity of concern.
* Any Police intelligence.
* Decide what further information is required at this stage.
* Arrange for its gathering.
* Establish if / to what extent complex abuse has been uncovered.
* Undertake an initial mapping exercise (series of genograms, a grid setting out the associations between children and adults, locations and concerns) to determine the scale of the investigation and possible individuals implicated, including:
  + Peers (negative or positive).
  + Mapping in terms of locations, buildings, safe spaces.
  + Mapping of children not in education, linked through managed moves and alternative provisions.
* Prepare:
  + Witnesses to be interviewed prior to the interviews of children.
  + Multiple and simultaneous interviews.
* Consider a plan including resource implications. The plan should include:
  + Diversion tactics to disrupt the perpetrators and who is taking what action and by when (eg. any relevant Orders to be served on perpetrators, or where licensed operations are involved, suspension of licenses or contracts pending further enquiries).
  + Intervention and support that focuses on addressing wider environmental factors.
  + Implementation of any safeguarding measures.
  + Whether any media alerts are required.
  + Any individual assessments and / or commencement of Section 47 investigations, with outcomes being reported to subsequent Strategy Meetings.
* Consider any immediate protective action required (reference application to the National Referral Mechanism).
* Identify any Police action that may be taken.

Where the Strategy Meeting confirms that the investigation will relate to complex and organised abuse, it will appoint a multi-agency 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.

**6. Confidentiality**

All information shared within the meeting must remain confidential. Should any information need to be shared outside of the meeting, this should not be shared without the prior consent of the sharing agency.

**7. Recording**

A designated Business Support Officer must be appointed to assist the Chair of the Strategy Meeting.

All information needs to be recorded directly on the child’s record in Liquid Logic on the Strategy Discussion Form, and any reports or additional information uploaded.

Where there are multiple children discussed, please ensure that the ID numbers of the children linked are noted within the Strategy Meeting.

Minutes of the Meeting should be shared with all attendees within 24 hours where possible.

**6. The Strategic Management Group**

The Strategic Management Group will be chaired by a senior officer in Children's Social Care Services and will:

* Complete the mapping process started by the Strategy Discussion.
* Specify the terms of reference for the enquiry/investigation, including the parameters/timescales of their enquiries/investigations.
* 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. **N.B.** 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.
* In cases of greater scale and complexity, appointment an 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 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.

**7. The Investigation Management Group**

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

Membership of this group should include representatives from Children's Social Care Services, 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 Investigation Management Group will be subject to the terms of reference agreed by the Strategic Management Group, and will include the following:

* To co-ordinate the inter-agency response to families and provide consistent information;
* 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 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 Strategic Management Group informed of resources and any shortfalls;
* To ensure a consistent and appropriate inter-agency approach to support victims and their families;
* To ensure information is shared appropriately with other agencies not represented on the Strategic Management Group or the Investigation Management Group;
* To ensure that relevant intelligence is passed between agencies and to the police Major Incident Room (MIR).

**8. 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.

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 to be presented to the Head of Safeguarding. This will be shared with the Safeguarding Children Partnership, highlighting any practices, procedures or policies which may need further attention and require either inter-agency or individual agency action plans.