



Being Safe

**A Review of Safeguarding Children and Young People
by a Working Group of the
Children, Young People and Learning Overview &
Scrutiny Panel**



January 2011

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4. Conclusions

From its review, the Working Group has drawn the following conclusions.

General

- 4.1 This has been a very extensive review of a matter of the highest importance to the community. We set out with no predetermined notions of whether the services to safeguard children and young people were lacking in any way. We have met some of the children and their parents who have used the Council's safeguarding services, we have met a large number of people from the Council and its various partner organisations engaged in safeguarding; we have taken views of others; and we have researched a lot of the key reports and other information available nationally on safeguarding. All this has helped us to form a well evidenced and comprehensive view of how well the Borough looks after the interests of children and young people who are vulnerable and at risk of abuse.
- 4.2 We adopted a structured approach to this review, following the guidance for scrutiny of safeguarding recommended by the Improvement and Development Agency and the Centre for Public Scrutiny. This included obtaining written answers from the Director of Children's Services to the 'top ten' questions (see Appendix 5). We have endeavoured to put the interests of the Borough's children and young people at the forefront throughout our review, and this has been greatly helped by our Working Group including teachers, parents, grandparents, a representative of the voluntary sector active in this field, and members of the Council's Corporate Parenting Advisory Panel.
- 4.3 We have been struck by the professionalism and commitment of the people we met, the huge importance, size and complexity of the service, and the range of activity. In its widest sense, almost all council services have a contribution to make to safeguarding, from the obvious – such as schools, children's social services, and children's centres - to the somewhat less obvious, such as the action on domestic violence, road safety, and preventing sales of knives and alcohol to underage young people.
- 4.4 The Council's overall approach aims to keep as paramount the interests of children and young people, and we are satisfied that that is being achieved in all important respects. The Working Group strongly endorses the view of the 2010 'Munro Review of Child protection' that 'A dominant theme in the criticisms of current practice is the skew in priorities that has developed between the demands of the management and inspection processes and professionals' ability to exercise their professional judgment and act in the best interests of the child. This has led to an over-standardised system that cannot respond adequately to the varied range of children's needs.' The Council must not fall into the trap of making the top priority pleasing the inspectors – in our view, the needs of children and young people must always be the top priority.

- 4.5 The review has led to us to reach positive conclusions on the most important aspects of safeguarding children and young people, and we believe that this is a reassuring message for everyone. We have grouped our conclusions under the broad headings below, and these form the basis for our recommendations in Section 5 of this report.
- 1. Are the Council and its partners throughout the community sufficiently alert to identify new cases of potential safeguarding concerns, and does it follow these up promptly and properly?**
- 4.6 The safeguarding services as a whole are evidently running well, as demonstrated by positive reports from OFSTED and the LSCB, satisfactory performance against national indicators and service plan objectives, and the various information we have gathered from our review. Even with workload pressures on the social workers, the Council and its partners still have the ability to work well. They have coped well with a major increase in the number of child protection cases, but we consider it has not yet been put to a big test, in terms of a serious case.
- 4.7 We are reassured and impressed by the commitment of the professionals involved in safeguarding, particularly in terms of their alertness to concerns and dealing with them speedily and thoroughly. The Assessment process seems robust, but we do have concerns over the usage and application of the Common Assessment Framework form, and we return to this in paragraphs 4.15-4.16 below. Partners seem to be alert and responsive to specific issues applying to Bracknell Forest, and have for example given targeted attention to the issue of sexual grooming.
- 4.8 There is good management, and there are cover arrangements. From our questioning, it is clear to us that the statutory roles of the Executive Member and Director are well understood and applied in practice. In addition, there is a quarterly meeting between the Council's Chief Executive, the Executive Member for Children and Young People, the Director of Children Young People & Learning, and the Chief Officer Children's Social Care; the purpose of this meeting is to monitor safeguarding activity and arrangements.
- 2. Do the Council and its partners have good plans, procedures and resources to achieve effective safeguarding?**
- 4.9 The evidence we have gathered leads us to conclude that there are good plans and processes, regularly updated and improved; for example, we commend the work being done to interview all children who go missing in order to see if any support systems have broken down, family or otherwise and how this may be addressed. The application of these plans and processes is greatly assisted by well-established and successful structures - including the Local Safeguarding Children Board and the Children's Trust - the turnover of social worker staffing being lower than in many other councils, and the good training in place for Council and partner organisations' staff, schools, and the voluntary sector.
- 4.10 Comprehensive procedures are in place and are evidently in use, with a range of quality assurance mechanisms to ensure safe practice:
- The LSCB undertake and report on multi-agency case analysis on a regular basis

- Child protection conferences are audited by representatives of at least three of the organisations required to attend child protection conferences, including Children's Social Care, to ensure multi-agency decision making. There is also family participation and provision of written reports.
- The Children's Social Care Management Team has a programme of regular auditing of cases.

This is supported by achieving an understanding of factors influencing workload, and in that regard we think it was important for the Council to have analysed the significant increase in the number of child protection plans (paragraph 2.28).

- 4.11 The work is very much demand led, and the staff we met seemed quite hard-pressed, particularly in the Under-11's Team. We were told by this team that the main ways of coping with surges in work were staff working considerably more hours than their contracts provided for, and reducing the amount of time spent on the less worrying cases. The Chief Officer has clarified that as the service is demand-led, at certain times staff are required to work late or to work additional hours. The expectation is that staff then take time off in lieu to compensate for this, although this is not always easy to accommodate. When there are above average pressures in particular teams, then action is taken by the management team, as it was on this occasion by: allocation of some of the cases in other teams where there is more capacity, use of short term contracts to employ known and familiar social workers to increase capacity, and rigorous management oversight of cases through regular meetings to ensure that all cases are allocated, and prioritised according to the level of risk. The Under-11s Team was fully staffed by October 2010. In general, the Children's Social Care Service has benefited from low staff turnover and positive team working.
- 4.12 We are reassured by the active management of resources, but we nonetheless consider these arrangements are unfair on the staff and they are not sufficiently robust. The tragedies which have occurred in children's social care elsewhere show that the greatest danger of mishaps will occur when the system is under stress. We would like to see more contingency arrangements in place, for example for temporary re-deployment of staff between the teams in children's services, but also between them and adult services. We recognise that in practice, taking on new workers places an additional burden on the team as processes need to be explained, and the new workers will take time to develop their knowledge of the families. We also see scope for some sort of reciprocal arrangement for mutual assistance with children's teams in adjoining local authorities. The joint arrangements for the out-of-hours duty team show that BFC can work effectively with other councils. We acknowledge that this arrangement isn't a pooling of resources otherwise deployed within one borough; it is a joint arrangement which is funded by the 6 Berkshire Unitary Authorities, and hosted by the Council who employ the staff as a distinct team.
- 4.13 The Group is concerned that there should be no lessening of the work on early, integrated and targeted intervention and support. Specifically, the Council should reconsider the reduction in resources for Teenage Pregnancy advice and the Early Intervention Team. We acknowledge that both these changes were effectively forced on the Council by the government's sudden reduction in the Area Based Grant, which funded them. The Working Group

received strong representations from the staff of a major school that both these changes were very harmful, and we agree with the Headteacher concerned that this kind of preventative work – in this case, minimising teenage pregnancies when the UK has some of the worst rates in Western Europe, and tackling signs of criminal behaviour in young people – is very valuable. It not only has a dramatic effect on the life chances of the children and young people involved in the programme, but is highly likely to be economically cost effective when set against the cost to society of unwanted teenage pregnancies and increased criminal activity.

- 4.14 The Bracknell Forest LSCB has issued a very useful and practical 'Safeguarding Toolkit', which we warmly endorse as an excellent resource available, to be used by all agencies to audit their policies and procedures. We observed that Section D of the toolkit is reserved for good practice examples, but this is currently empty. Given that the Toolkit is designed for the use of a wide variety of people and organisations, we suggest that it would be helpful if the LSCB could include 'real life' examples of good practice to illustrate the practical application of the guidance. The safeguarding toolkit is evidently only in the early stages of roll-out in the voluntary sector, and there is a need for completion of the self-assessment audit and its return with a plan of action. It is hoped that with the Children and Young People's Voluntary Community Sector Development Worker – who will be employed by the BFVA in support of the sector - being in place this will be facilitated in the voluntary sector, especially among the smaller groups.
- 4.15 We are concerned with the unresolved issues raised by Kennel Lane Special School concerning the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) Form, and the related processes as being unsuitable for their needs. We note that there is a differing view on this by Council officers, but we are cognisant of the school's comment that other councils appear to operate the CAF system better. We also note Bracknell Forest Voluntary Action's comment that the CAF process is very patchy and not given the priority it once had, particularly from social services and the NHS. CAF forms have been filled out but then no response is forthcoming. BFVA told us that there was an ongoing issue of needing more capacity for safeguarding issues and processes in the voluntary sector. The Council's partners have a responsibility too in relation to the CAF process. We had similar concerns about the CAF expressed by others, including in the latest report from Ofsted (see Appendix 4.8) and it is clear to us that the CAF form is not applied consistently in the community. We note this has also been referred to by the LSCB in their recent annual report, and we are encouraged that the Chairman of the Children's Trust has acknowledged the need for action.
- 4.16 We note that there have been some positive aspects to the development of the CAF process. The Council has worked hard to introduce and embed the CAF, including having a dedicated CAF Coordinator. The number of CAF's has increased significantly in the last two years; an increasing amount of time has been spent by officers advising people on CAF's; and training events have been held on the usage of CAF's.
- 4.17 Thames Valley Police told us that legislation requires local authorities to provide safe and secure accommodation for children (between 10 and 17) who are in custody overnight. The Council does not have any such accommodation, so on the rare occasions that this is required, the child is kept in a detention room or a cell. We are reassured to have been told by the

Council that incidents requiring safe and secure overnight accommodation are very rare and a satisfactory solution is always found to them, but we would like to see this important issue formally resolved.

- 4.18 Thames Valley Police also told us that there is a lack of qualified Force Medical Examiners (FME) that can assess children in Bracknell Forest. The Chief Inspector has taken this issue to the LSCB. The Working Group has also raised this point with the PCT's Director of Public Health and other senior staff involved in safeguarding. The PCT's Consultant Paediatrician has subsequently advised us that whilst there have been individual cases where difficulties have arisen, there are in fact clear guidelines for examination agreed across the Thames Valley with police and health, which if properly applied should mean that no child needs to travel long distances. There is now a full FME rota.
- 4.19 We are impressed by Berkshire East Primary Care Trust's (PCT) commitment and expertise on safeguarding, but we are greatly concerned that the huge changes looming in the NHS should not result in a reduction in that service. The NHS White paper proposes that the public health function in PCTs – which includes the commissioning role on safeguarding - is to transfer to local authorities before 2013, and in the case of the Berkshire East PCT, this will involve a set of transfers to three unitary authorities including BFC. At the same time, there is to be a cut of some 50% in the PCT's management costs. A further major issue is the transfer of the community health service – which includes the 'provider' service on safeguarding – from the PCT to the Berkshire Healthcare Trust in 2011. During these massive changes, it will be vital not to divert attention from effective safeguarding. We see this as a huge risk to be managed jointly by the PCT, the Healthcare Trust, the GP Consortium for BF, and the Council.
- 4.20 Plans and procedures are only as good as their application in practice. We are reassured by the indications of good supervision, management, and review. Above all, safeguarding is highly dependant on the prevailing culture, and on this too we were reassured by what we saw.

3. Does the extended partnership work well together?

- 4.21 Effective safeguarding of children and young people depends on a lot of people in many different roles and organisations working together in partnership. All have an important contribution to make, and the chain can only be as strong as its weakest link. The Working Group has met a wide variety of people in the Council and its partner organisations during this review. We have been impressed by their commendable sense of partnership, and the universal commitment of everyone to do their very best to safeguard children and young people in the Borough. Whilst no system, however well resourced, can guarantee there will never be instances of children and young people being harmed, we are greatly heartened by what we have seen during this review.
- 4.22 Within Bracknell Forest we are fortunate in having an extensive voluntary sector to deliver services and activities to the children and young people sector. We see it as a positive strength to have the LSCB Annual Conferences draw together all the partners concerned with safeguarding throughout the borough.

- 4.23 We were advised that the Children's Trust also the LSCB have too many members for it to be effective and agile. Both could usefully consider whether it might be better to have the wider group meeting less frequently with a smaller subset of that group operating in an executive capacity and meeting more frequently, with full accountability to the wider group. This has a close similarity to the successful arrangements in the Bracknell Forest Partnership.
- 4.24 We were encouraged to hear from both schools we met that they have good relationships with Children's Social Care, and Thames Valley Police. However, we think there needs to be a fuller understanding and appropriate adaptation of procedures in the Council to take account of the particular circumstances and safeguarding issues involved with Kennel Lane Special School. We particularly draw attention to the School's views that:
- Partner agencies need to be better educated on what the school does. This could include having new social care staff spend a day at the school as part of their induction training.
 - The school has developed specialised social work independently and consider that some of the Council's social service function could be accordingly devolved to the school and funding be provided.
 - Either a named Social Worker should be assigned to disabled children issues in the Duty Team (to build understanding, and to give a 'familiar face' with the children), or arrangements are made so the school can send new referrals straight to the Disabled Children Team.

The primary school Headteachers raised issues around capacity, the CAF process, communications and information.

- 4.25 Social Workers generally have had a bad press in recent years, nationwide. This is often unfair, for example the recently released Serious Case review reports on Baby Peter showed that there were failures by all the organisations – including the NHS and the Police - involved in ensuring he was protected. The Working Group met some of our Council's Social Workers and we were very impressed by them; they are doing a challenging and highly responsible job, often in difficult circumstances. They do not deserve to be vilified and we, on behalf of all Councillors, cannot thank them enough for what they do to protect some of the most vulnerable people in our society today.

4. Has the Council learnt and applied the lessons from OFSTED, Haringey and Birmingham?

- 4.26 We consider that the full extent of these lessons has yet to be fully appreciated and applied across the country. To the extent that new national requirements were put in place by the government in the light of these tragic cases, and the Council has complied with all national requirements, the lessons have been applied. Similarly, we consider that the council has acted appropriately on reports from OFSTED.
- 4.27 Our concern here is not on what has happened in Bracknell Forest, it is instead how well conditioned everyone is for what might happen. The lack of a crisis in Bracknell Forest certainly does not mean we should assume a tragedy will not happen. On this, it seemed to us in our review that the

Council and its partners are ready to 'think the unthinkable', and they should continue to do so.

5. What do the service users think of the service from Children's Social Care?

- 4.28 The Working Group gained a good understanding from our face to face meetings with service users, though as both groups we met were small in number we cannot know whether their views are representative of everyone. The children we met were very appreciative of and had great faith in their social workers. The children also made some helpful suggestions concerning the arrangements for making complaints and suggestions (paragraph 3.58 (g)). The young adults with children suggested more effective publicity be given to facilities such as Children's Centres (paragraph 3.44(j)). The young adults with children were not positive; they generally felt that they did not require social services. The adults felt the social workers were intrusive but the children felt that they could relate more easily.
- 4.29 The adults met by the working group reported much lower levels of satisfaction with the service than is the norm for other Council services. The Group has considered this carefully. On the one hand, any reports of low customer satisfaction need to be followed up, but on the other hand, the social care service is by its nature going to be unpopular with some or even many service users and it will be controversial. We should neither hide from nor be fearful of that as an organisation. While taking into account the views of parents, what we must bear in mind is that the needs of the child must be paramount, and the feelings of parents secondary to that. The WG's overall view is that – just like the council's regulatory services - some dissatisfaction with the service by the parents of children receiving care services is unfortunate but inevitable, and it should not distract the children's social care service delivering the services which they believe are necessary for the children's well-being.
- 4.30 A common view among people we met was that parents tended to see the Council's social services team as a threat, likely to result in their children being taken away from them. The Council should take every opportunity it can to stress that the social services team is there to provide support in the first instance, and whilst putting the interests of the child first, the emphasis is on helping them to stay with their families wherever possible. In reality, few children are taken away from their families, and this can only be done with the approval of the Courts. In communicating this message, the Council could usefully take account of the very helpful report by the Children's Commissioner on family perspectives and relationships with children's services, which we summarise at Appendix 4.10.

6. Has this review built Members' knowledge and understanding?

- 4.31 This has been a challenging, positive and very interesting Overview and Scrutiny review, and it has greatly added to the knowledge and understanding of the members of the Working Group. Given also that some of us are teachers or otherwise involved in safeguarding – for example as members of the Council's Corporate Parenting Advisory Panel – this leads us to think that more information on the vital issue of safeguarding could usefully be made available to all councillors. For example, the key messages from the LSCB annual reports and the outcome of the quarterly formal meetings of the

Executive Member, Chief Executive, and Director of Children's Services should be openly communicated. We believe the value of this wider communication was demonstrated by the very positive response from Councillors when everyone was issued with the new 'cue cards'.

- 4.32 The tragic cases at Haringey, Birmingham and elsewhere have resulted in increased Member understanding and interest in those councils and to some extent, nationally. No council should wait for a tragedy before it gains sufficient understanding and commitment to safeguarding. Safeguarding is complex. Members cannot be expected to have full knowledge or understanding of this or indeed any of the Council's wide range of specific activities. However, the huge importance of safeguarding demands that all Members are equipped with an up to date understanding of the main safeguarding principles and practice. We are encouraged to see that an all-member briefing was arranged on safeguarding for January 2011, and we encourage the Council's leadership to use this and other means to build and maintain Members' understanding of safeguarding. We would also see merit in:
- (i) The Group's report being sent to all Councillors and the Town and Parish Councils for their consideration too.
 - (ii) As part of their induction, all Councillors should be given the LSCB cue card. They should be required to sign a statement of their safeguarding responsibilities, both for adults and children, also a summary of the Council's safeguarding policies.
- 7. Overall, has the Council done all it reasonably can do to safeguard children and young people from harm and abuse?**
- 4.33 In overall terms, in all major respects we are very satisfied that the Council and its partners have done all they reasonably can to safeguard children and young people. This is notwithstanding the observations and recommendations made elsewhere in this report, which point out the need for constant improvement. It behoves everyone not to be complacent or relax their efforts for one moment.
- 4.34 Almost everything the Council does has some impact on safeguarding children and we must build on this, making it more explicit.
- 4.35 We are impressed by the weight of effort put into identifying and addressing individual cases of children and young people suspected or known to be at risk of harm, but we query whether an appropriate balance of effort is going into universal prevention measures; for example, we see excellent parenting support at Children's Centres, but not much of a 'universal' offering beyond that. In this regard, we welcome the emphasis being given by the Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnership to tackle cases of domestic violence, not least because these cases often have a bearing on child abuse too.
- 4.36 Everyone can take great assurance from the fact that cases of children being seriously abused and harmed are extremely rare in Bracknell Forest; however, we cannot be certain that all cases of possible abuse are known about, and there is always scope for improvement. We must not succumb to the risk of complacency, and our vigilance must be constant.

5. Recommendations

It is recommended to the Executive Member for Children and Young People that:

- 5.1 The Council should continue to ensure that it provides the necessary profile, resources and support for safeguarding children and young people, which we see as among the most important responsibilities of a local authority.
- 5.2 Reflecting Lord Laming's encouragement for local authorities to put children at the heart of everything we do, all Council service areas could usefully look to see how their contribution towards safeguarding children could be more explicitly recognised. Similarly, to improve universal awareness and understanding of the vital business of safeguarding, we recommend that the Council raises the profile of safeguarding where possible, for example in adopting a job specification for the Lead Member for Children's Service, reflecting their statutory duties (paragraph 3.51), also articles in 'Town and Country' (paragraph 4.30).
- 5.3 Better arrangements should be made for dealing with unforeseeable increases in Social Services workload, since experience of tragedies elsewhere shows this to be a great risk to effective safeguarding. This could include larger contingency arrangements – both financial and staffing – and developing more reciprocal arrangements with other local authorities nearby (paragraph 4.12).
- 5.4 Whilst we recognise the positive progress made with the important Common Assessment Form in various ways, we recommend the CAF processes should be reviewed in the light of differing views as to its purpose, and the criticisms expressed to us. In particular, there is a lack of universal understanding about what the CAF process is actually for. The review should determine whether the processes could be improved to give a more appropriate and effective method for assessment and referral of cases (paragraph 4.15), particularly in relation to Special Schools, and feedback to those utilising the forms.
- 5.5 The Council and its partners should consider how to improve joint working and communication with schools, both on individual cases and on increasing schools' knowledge of thresholds and the appropriate use of the CAF.
- 5.6 The Executive Member should review whether an appropriate balance of effort is going into universal prevention measures (paragraph 4.35).
- 5.7 The highly necessary work on early, integrated and targeted intervention and support must be properly resourced. This particularly applies to teenage pregnancy advice, alcohol abuse, and early intervention. This could usefully be co-ordinated with the planned transfer of the Public Health function from Primary Care Trusts to local authorities, which will include sexual health issues (paragraphs 4.13 and 4.19). If the resources could be found, we would particularly like to see the reinstatement of an officer post to give full-time, focused attention to teenage pregnancy issues.

- 5.8 This Overview and Scrutiny report should be presented by the Lead Member of the Working Group to the Local Safeguarding Children Board, for their appropriate action.
- 5.9 To strengthen the success of the Local Safeguarding Children Board and Children's Trust:
- a) The Council's website should give clearer links to the role and activities of the LSCB and the Children's Trust.
 - b) The LSCB should be asked to include 'real life' examples of good practice in their safeguarding Toolkit.
 - c) The Council should continue to actively promote the Toolkit and support the Voluntary sector in their take-up of it.
 - d) We support the view of the Executive member for Children and Young People that there is scope to further improve engagement with young people, for example, in terms of a 'shadow' Children's Trust, led by children and young people.
 - e) The LSCB Safeguarding Cue Cards are an excellent idea, and should remain freely available to all, and promoted at every opportunity.
 - f) The structure of the Children's Trust also the LSCB should be reviewed, in particular to determine whether it might be better to have the wider groups meeting less frequently with a smaller subset of each group operating in an executive capacity and meeting more frequently, with full accountability to the wider group.
- 5.10 The Council should consider giving more effective publicity to facilities such as the Family and Children's Centres and parent groups provided by the Council and its partners, to increase uptake, in view of the comments we received from parents that they are valued and more people needed to be aware of what facilities and support are available (paragraph 4.28).
- 5.11 A formal understanding be made between the Council and Thames Valley Police demonstrating how the Council meets its legal responsibility to provide safe and secure accommodation for children who are in custody overnight (paragraph 4.17).
- 5.12 During the massive changes planned by the Government for the NHS, the Executive Member should work closely with the Executive Member for Adult Services, Health and Housing to ensure that there is an orderly transfer of the Public Health and related functions from the PCT to the Council and the GP Consortium, such that the NHS's current role in safeguarding remains effective (paragraph 4.19).
- 5.13 The Council should obtain feedback occasionally from parents and children, along the lines of the two surveys we carried out (see paragraphs 3.42-3.44 and 3.53-3.58), in addition to routinely obtaining views from individual service users at the close of cases.
- 5.14 The Council should actively promote putting the interests of the child first. We recommend that the Council should take every opportunity it can to stress that the social services team is there to provide support in the first instance. The emphasis is on helping children to stay with their families wherever possible, and very few children are taken into care. This is to counter the reported views of many parents seeing social workers as a threat, likely to result in their children being taken away from them (paragraphs 4.28-4.30).

- 5.15 We think it was important for the Council to have analysed the significant increase in the number of child protection plans. We recommend that funding is provided for the monitoring of the recommendations made in the analysis and for future analyses as necessary (paragraph 4.10).
- 5.16 The young people we met thought the complaints system could be more user-friendly and made some suggestions, which we ask the Executive to consider. These included: having a suggestion box which has slips entitled 'I have a worry about...' More publicity needs to be given to the Council's text message service and the pre-paid returnable card which allow young people to submit their worries or concerns to the Council without having to incur a cost (paragraph 4.28).
- 5.17 The Executive Member should consider how the commitment of, and regular flow of information to councillors on the vital issue of safeguarding might be usefully enhanced, specifically through the proposals we set out in paragraph 4.32.
- 5.18 The Executive Member is asked to convey to the Council's social workers the Working Group's appreciation that they have a challenging and highly responsible job to do, often in difficult circumstances. We think we speak on behalf of all councillors by saying we cannot thank them enough for what they do to protect some of the most vulnerable people in our society today.

It is recommended to the Children, Young People and Learning Overview and Scrutiny Panel that:

- 5.19 The Panel should continue to receive and review the annual report of the Local Safeguarding Children Board, and in future this should include a discussion on the report with the Chair of the LSCB, in the Panel's public meeting.