

Committees	Dated:
Safeguarding Sub Committee	06/02/2018
Subject: Report on an Exploration of How Social Workers Engage Neglectful Parents from Affluent Backgrounds in the Child Protection System	Public
Report of: Director Community and Children's Services	For Information
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Summary

This report informs Members of the findings of research into neglect linked to affluence, carried out by Goldsmiths, University of London as part of the Knowledge Transfer Programme, a partnership between Goldsmiths and the Department of Community and Children's Services. The main purpose of the study was to understand the issues that arise for social workers around discovering and confronting parental neglect in affluent families, and to identify and develop potential practice interventions when working with this issue.

An initial literature review carried out by Goldsmiths identified that there was a significant lack of research carried out in the UK, although there was more evidence from overseas. As a result of this, coupled with evidence of practice issues identified via City & Hackney Safeguarding Children Board audits, this detailed research was commissioned with the aim of seeking to better understand and assist social work practice in this area.

The research did not draw solely on the City of London experiences but on direct evidence and experiences from social workers who worked in 12 local authority areas, county councils and unitary authorities across England. Indices of deprivation (income, health, education, housing, crime, and so on) by geographical areas were used to select five counties and seven local authorities that represented a geographical mix and a range of socio-economic divisions.

The research was overseen by an expert panel made up of representatives from Goldsmiths University, City of London Children's Social Care, City & Hackney Safeguarding Children Board and, for its final meeting, representatives from the City's independent schools.

The research identified a number of key findings including;

- The vast majority of the cases described by the participants concerned emotional neglect, although other forms of maltreatment, such as sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and emotional abuse, were also identified.

- Commonly encountered cases involved struggling teenagers in private fee-paying and boarding schools, who were often isolated from their parents physically and emotionally, and had complex safeguarding needs.
- Participants consistently cited that highly resistant parents were more likely to use legal advocates or the complaints procedures to challenge social workers.
- Considerable experience, practice wisdom and knowledge of neglect were essential in relation to working with highly resistant parents who had the resources to challenge social workers' decision-making.

This report will be presented to practitioners from all the local authorities, county councils and unitary areas involved in the research at a seminar event at Goldsmiths University at the end of January 2018.

At a local level, the learning from the research will be built into the Children's Social Care Service Improvement Plan and will link directly back into local practice.

Recommendation

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

Main Report

Background

1. This exploratory research was commissioned by the City of London and was developed from a scoping review that sought to find out what is known about child neglect in affluent families.

2. The scoping review identified that there is a paucity of research in the UK looking at how social workers engage parents from affluent backgrounds in the child protection system to address the issue of child neglect. This study therefore investigated what factors arise for social workers in responding to this type of child maltreatment in affluent families.

3. The main purpose of the study was to understand the issues that arise for social workers around discovering and confronting parental neglect in affluent families and to identify and develop successful intervention practice.

4. Three specific research questions guided this inquiry:

- How do social workers identify risk factors for vulnerable children in affluent circumstances?
- Which factors inhibit or enable social workers' engagement with affluent parents when there are child protection concerns?

- What kind of skills, knowledge and experience is necessary for frontline social workers to effectively assert their professional authority with affluent parents when there are concerns about abuse and neglect?

5. Participants were recruited from 12 local authorities, county councils and unitary authorities in England. The research sites were selected using the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's Open Data Communities data platform. Indices of deprivation (income, health, education, housing, crime, and so on) by geographical areas were used to select five counties and seven local authorities that represented a geographical mix and a range of socio-economic divisions. Therefore, some of the authorities in the sample were characterised by extremes of wealth and deprivation.

6. The sample consisted of professional stakeholders from across children's services and included;

- frontline social workers
- team managers
- an early help team manager
- principal social workers
- designated safeguarding leads
- service managers
- a head of service for safeguarding standards
- a local authority designated officer.

7. The goal was to include a diverse representation of professionals with particular experiences of child protection who were either active in frontline practice, and/or learning and development in the same organisation.

8. A semi-structured topic guide was used in interviews and focus groups with a total of 30 participants. The interview questions explored aspects of the practitioners' experiences of how they engage affluent parents when there were safeguarding concerns. The interviews and focus groups lasted, on average, one hour and were audio-recorded, transcribed in full, and anonymised. The Research Ethics and Integrity Committee, Goldsmiths, University of London, granted ethical approval for the study.

Current Position

9. The research identified four overarching themes from the data analysis:

- recognising and addressing neglect
- privilege and entitlement
- barriers to escalating concerns
- factors that make a difference for authoritative practice.

Recognising and addressing neglect

10. Issues highlighted by participants included:

- difficulty in interpreting and assessing emotional neglect, especially when parenting for children from affluent backgrounds might come from paid carers
- challenges of parents recognising emotional neglect that can be linked to the home environment
- high levels of domestic abuse, drug and alcohol abuse and mental health issues
- hidden issues because families are able to access privately funded resources
- participants' comments that public schools would deal with safeguarding concerns in-house, making it difficult to develop a shared understanding of neglect.

Privilege and entitlement

11. Issues highlighted by participants included:

- Parents had access to powerful social networks which some used to resist social work intervention.
- Practitioners felt belittled with threats of complaints and legal intervention and also felt that their involvement was regarded as an unwarranted intrusion.
- Some participants commented that parents would only deal with managers if there had to be involvement.
- All participants felt that the parents' socio-economic status gave them a sense of privilege that encouraged them to subject the social work practice to a level of scrutiny in a way that families from lower socio-economic backgrounds did not.
- Significantly, the challenge was then to ensure the focus remained on the needs of the child.

Barriers to escalating concerns

12. Issues highlighted by participants included:

- challenges in gathering information as part of the escalation to a child protection assessment
- non-compliance was a feature of this type of casework
- involvement of lawyers and use of the complaints process when escalating to a child protection assessment
- challenges of accessing direct observation of children and their relationship with parents
- practitioners who had contact with children, especially older children, were able to achieve good outcomes when the children were able to engage in the assessment process.

Factors that make a difference for authoritative practice

13. Issues highlighted by participants included that practitioners needed:

- personal qualities in assertiveness, confidence and being self-assured
- a good understanding of the threshold of emotional neglect and a good level of legal literacy
- to pay more attention to how they presented themselves as an expert and authority figure, including how they dressed and spoke
- good support and supervision from their manager.

Key messages

14. The research identified the following key messages:

- The findings revealed that thresholds for neglect are not always understood, which posed challenges for effectively safeguarding children at risk of significant harm in privileged families.
- The vast majority of the cases described by the participants concerned emotional neglect, although other forms of maltreatment, such as sexual abuse, child sexual exploitation and emotional abuse, were also identified.
- Commonly encountered cases involved struggling teenagers in private fee-paying and boarding schools, who were often isolated from their parents physically and emotionally, and had complex safeguarding needs.
- Participants gave many examples to show how parents had the financial resources to access psychological support through private care providers to address their children's emotional and behavioural problems. Some practitioners viewed this as a positive outcome for the child, but some saw this as a way for the parents to opt out of the statutory child protection system, and to thus slip under the radar of children's services.
- All of the participants described difficulties in maintaining focus on the child because of the way that parents used their status and social capital to resist child protection intervention. Many also displayed a sense of entitlement to do as they pleased and an attitude that 'they know best'.
- Participants consistently cited that highly resistant parents were more likely to use legal advocates or the complaints procedures to challenge social workers.
- All of the participants also experienced the challenges of inter-agency working with private fee-paying and boarding schools when child protection concerns were raised.

- Considerable experience, practice wisdom and knowledge of neglect were essential in relation to working with highly resistant parents who had the resources to challenge social workers' decision-making.
- Skills, knowledge and competence: all of the participants highlighted the important role that supportive managers and good supervision played in helping them to effectively intervene in affluent families.
- Key to their ability to work in this complex field, participants cite the organisational culture of support, purposeful informal conversations about the case with colleagues, good supervision, knowledge, confidence, responsive managers, and themed learning activities.

Next Steps

15. This report will be presented at a seminar at Goldsmiths University on 31 January 2018 to more than 100 participants from all the local areas who were involved in the research, academics from Goldsmiths and other Higher Education Institutions, and representatives from the Department for Education.

16. A City of London learning session will be held with the City of London Children and Families Service to consider the learning opportunities and how these can inform local practice.

17. The agreed actions from the City learning event will be included in the Children and Families Service Improvement Plan which is subject to ongoing monitoring via the Service Improvement Board and the Safeguarding Sub Committee.

18. Future audits will consider the implementation of learning from this research.

Corporate & Strategic Implications

19. The findings of the research and the learning that will feed back into practice will support the City's ambition, through its Children and Young People's Plan, to ensure children are safe and feel safe

Financial Implications

20. There are no financial implications associated with this report.

Health Implications

21. There are no health risks that would require Public Health engagement

Conclusion

22. This report has highlighted the findings of research into issues associated with identifying child abuse linked to parents from affluent backgrounds. The research identified four thematic areas from data analysis which have captured the learning and the report sets out a number of points of learning.

23. These learning points will form part of the City of London Children's Services Improvement Plan that will help to inform social work practice. The Improvement Plan will be monitored by the Service Improvement Board and the Safeguarding Sub Committee.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – *An Exploration of How Social Workers Engage Neglectful Parents from Affluent Backgrounds in the Child Protection System*, Professor Claudia Bernard, Goldsmiths, University of London

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