

Voluntary agencies

This report summarises risk factors and learning for improved practice for voluntary agencies

September 2019

Introduction

Voluntary agencies play a key role in children's lives. Published case reviews highlight that voluntary agencies are sometimes unsure on their roles and responsibilities around child protection and safeguarding.

The learning from these case reviews highlights the need for voluntary agencies to have clear child protection policies and procedures and to work with statutory and other agencies in the event of a child protection incident.

Reasons case reviews were commissioned

The findings and learning in this briefing are taken from case reviews published since 2011. It pulls together and highlights the learning contained in the published reports.

The children in these case reviews became the subject of reviews following:

- sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and sexually harmful behaviour
- chronic neglect over a period of years
- child death.

Key issues for voluntary agencies in case reviews

Child protection roles and responsibilities

Voluntary agencies are sometimes unsure of their role in the wider child protection system and their safeguarding responsibilities.

Organisations may not have robust child protection policies and often do not train volunteers on how to follow procedures.

The informality of some voluntary settings may mean that individual staff members and volunteers are not equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to recognise and respond appropriately to child protection concerns.

Staff and volunteers may not feel comfortable displaying professional curiosity and enquiring deeper into what is happening within a family rather than accepting things at face value.

Multi-agency involvement

Serious case reviews often highlight the good practice of voluntary agencies in sharing their concerns with statutory agencies. There are many examples of the persistence of individual practitioners in making referrals.

However, some case reviews show that there can be confusion, misunderstanding or assumptions about which agencies are involved with a family and what services are actually being provided to different family members.

Voluntary agencies are not always included in child protection conferences and local safeguarding agencies are not always engaged with voluntary organisations, particularly faith communities.

Staff and volunteers in voluntary agencies do not always see it as their responsibility to report concerns around the way other agencies manage cases.

Adult-focused services

Voluntary agencies are often providing services to adults who are parents. The focus from practitioners on the parents' issues sometimes meant the impact on their children was overlooked.

Lack of clarity around referral criteria

When statutory services refer children and/or adults to services provided by the voluntary sector, this may or may not be part of a formal care or support plan. But professionals are not always familiar with the specific referral criteria of other organisations' individual services. This can lead to inappropriate referrals being made or inappropriate services being provided.

Prioritising good relationships with service users

Voluntary agencies often have different relationships with the people who use their services than statutory agencies. This difference in culture can mean that staff and volunteers may prioritise the wish to maintain good relationships with parents over a child's safeguarding needs.

Learning for improved practice

Develop strong policies and procedures

- Voluntary agencies should ensure they have strong child protection and safeguarding policies and procedures and that all staff and volunteers understand how to follow them.
- All staff and volunteers should receive relevant safeguarding and child protection training, including understanding any specific risks that are related to the work they undertake and the people they work with.
- Staff and volunteers should be encouraged and supported to follow up any questions and concerns and display professional curiosity by communicating with children and parents to gain a fuller picture of family life and not accept things at face value.

Engage with other agencies

- Voluntary organisations should pro-actively engage with local safeguarding agencies and other organisations involved in child protection.
- Staff and volunteers should be informed of the roles of all agencies involved in child protection and the services being provided to families they are working with where appropriate.
- All members of voluntary organisations should report any concerns to relevant agencies.
- Voluntary organisations should provide relevant information to looked after child (LAC) reviews and request updated copies of child protection plans where appropriate. This includes when a statutory agency works directly and regularly with a child the voluntary organisation is supporting.

Record and share information about concerns and make referrals to statutory services

- Voluntary agencies should gather and record detailed information about family arrangements to inform multi-agency risk assessments. This includes where

children live and information about any men visiting, staying or living in the home.

- Voluntary agencies should feel confident reporting concerns about case management to other agencies involved in child protection cases; including following up referrals if it seems that no action has been taken.
- Information about safeguarding concerns should be shared with relevant agencies even if service users do not consent to this.
- Whilst telephone and face to face conversations can be more immediate, they should always be followed up with formalised referrals of concerns to relevant services.
- Voluntary agencies providing services to adults who are parents must consider the impact of a parent's problems on their ability to care for and safeguard their children and share concerns with relevant agencies.

Keep track of progress and take action to keep service users engaged

- Robust and timely assessments should be undertaken and progress and developments recorded.
- Voluntary organisations should inform the agency who referred a person to use their service if the service user is not engaging with the service (including refusing to attend or missing appointments).
- Organisations should consider how to overcome barriers to service user engagement, such as people not having the bus fare to get to the service.

References

A list of the case reviews consulted for this briefing is available here:

library.nspcc.org.uk/HeritageScripts/Hapi.dll/retrieve2?SetID=BA0F473A-5A6A-4ECF-9A44-1A733EBB69E7&DataSetName=LIVEDATA

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