

# Together we can end violence against women and girls

## HM Government Consultation paper

### Action for Children response

#### May 2009

Action for Children welcomes the opportunity to respond to this important consultation paper looking at how we can work together to end violence against women and girls. We very much support the ambition set out in this cross-government paper and we are keen to play our part. As practitioners we are aware of the devastating impact that violence and abuse has on the lives of children and families. We have welcomed recent developments to address this issue by challenging perceptions, strengthening protection and offering support. But we remain concerned about the lack of consistent funding for services. There is still a great need for children and young people to access direct support, especially services that allow them the opportunity to talk in a safe environment and receive support to increase their resilience.

We see our response as part of an on-going dialogue with the government about how we can work together to end violence against women and girls. In this response, we have only responded to those questions which relate to our direct experience of working with children, young people and families.

### Action for Children

Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential. We believe all children and young people have unique potential and that they should have the support and opportunities they need to reach it. Action for Children helps nearly 156,000 children, young people and their families through nearly 420 projects across the UK. We also promote social justice by lobbying and campaigning for change. Today, Action for Children is the leading UK provider of family and community centres, children's services in rural areas, services for disabled children and their families, and services for young people leaving care.

Action for Children works to ensure that children and young people are protected from harm, promoting positive outcomes for the children and young people we work with. Safeguarding children and young people is central to everything we do. We believe that every child has the right to be safe and that it is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that this happens.

### Key points:

- We believe that the consultation paper needs to have a stronger focus on children and young people both as survivors – and as perpetrators. For example there is a focus on rape and sexual violence (not words usually associated with children) rather than childhood sexual abuse, which is also a gendered form of violence. There are sections in the paper that do not sufficiently include a child or young person's perspective. An example is the section addressing women's fear of violent crime. Girls' fears are not necessarily the same as women's and merit their own investigation and response. In addition, the section on perpetrators has an adult focus and does not consider the specific challenges posed by, or treatment needs of, young offenders.
- We believe that the Government needs to pay more attention to the diverse needs of women and girls. Although there is reference to women with no recourse to public funds, there is no mention of specific groups of women and

girls who are disproportionately affected by violence and abuse. For example, the needs of girls in, or leaving, the care system will require particular attention – as do the needs of young women and girls with disabilities. Further, we do not believe the consultation makes sufficient reference to the needs of girls from different ethnic backgrounds and communities.

- We are pleased that specific sections in the consultation ask about services for victims. However, the new initiatives proposed in the paper do not reflect the areas of need that have been highlighted through our service delivery: specifically consistent and effective responses to children who have been affected by domestic abuse, and, therapeutic services for victims of child sex abuse. In addition, the paper does not refer to the large body of work which has already been undertaken. We believe that a trawl of existing guidance and service evaluations would be a good starting point from which to build the argument for more consistent local responses based on identified need.
- We very much welcome the cross-government approach taken in the consultation paper. Complex issues such as domestic and sexual violence cannot be tackled by agencies working in isolation. It is vital that the collaborative approach needed at a local level is replicated nationally. Incentives for multi-agency approaches must be built into the system.
- We are delighted that the paper pays tribute to the role of the voluntary and third sector – particularly the women's voluntary sector.
- In building on this work, the central role of local partnerships and local authorities in identifying need and co-ordinating service delivery should be highlighted. The consultation paper identifies inconsistencies in local responses and insecurities in the funding of services as the key challenges going forward. We would urge the Government to consider the incentives in the local commissioning framework, especially at a time when public spending is likely to be increasingly constrained.
- We are encouraged by the announcement of the new health taskforce to spot signs of violence against women. Action for Children would like to urge the full inclusion of girls within the scope of the task force and would be very happy to be directly involved.
- Finally, we would like the scope of the consultation to be made clearer. Will the Government be taking into account, and learning from the excellent work already undertaken in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland? In particular, multi-agency approaches to risk management in Wales, and the strategic approach to addressing the needs of children affected by domestic abuse adopted in Scotland should be drawn upon. To what extent will the proposed strategy have a UK remit? It would be helpful if the strategy could identify what separate and joint activity will be taking place across the four nations.

## **Responses to the consultation questions**

### **How should schools encourage young men to treat women and girls with respect, and not to resort to violent behaviour?**

Research into the attitudes of over 1,300 children aged eight to 16 found that:

- Over 75% of 11-12 year old boys thought that women get hit when they make men angry, and more boys than girls, of all ages, believed that some women deserve to be hit
- Boys of all ages, particularly teenagers, have less understanding than girls of who is at fault, and are more likely to excuse the perpetrator

- The vast majority of children at secondary school want to learn what to do about domestic violence and how to stop it<sup>1</sup>.

Already a number of local authorities are funding domestic abuse prevention and education programmes for children and young people. A number of excellent resources are already in existence. We were pleased to see the reference to the Womankind Worldwide project in the consultation paper. However, locally the use of these resources remains patchy. Funding for delivery of programmes is often short-term and insecure.

It is timely that the Government is now going to take stock of the different initiatives, guidance and materials that are being used within schools. We welcome the proposed new Advisory Group as a useful development. We would urge that in their approach they:

- Promote the adoption of a whole school approach. The research by Womankind recommends that while violence prevention programmes are generally delivered as part of the PSHCE curriculum, they are most effective when a whole school approach is adopted. This would include making the links to other education initiatives such as social inclusion, promoting wellbeing and work to tackle bullying.
- Training and support will need to be offered to school staff so that they are able to make the connections to school attendance, attainment and behaviour.
- The delivery of such education programmes in schools will inevitably result in disclosures being made by pupils. It is important that support services can be made available to affected children and young people. The proposed vision for the delivery of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools with its focus on early intervention and making the links to support services should help to facilitate this.

As well as work in schools, the government should also consider the promotion of education initiatives aimed at groups of particularly vulnerable and excluded children and young people, who may be more likely to be in abusive relationships (for example young offenders).

### **How do social attitudes towards girls and women affect the problem of violence against women? How can we challenge perceptions?**

#### **Family support**

Action for Children believes that working with families to build on strengths and to offer targeted support is a particularly effective approach to challenging perceptions and beliefs which may cross generations. Significant investment is needed in preventative services for children, young people and families with multiple problems to prevent re-occurring cycles that reinforce these problems.

#### **Action for Children Pinnacle Project, south London**

The Pinnacle Project was set up in 2006 with central government funding, following public interest and concern about violent crime carried out by young people in South London, where a large proportion of offenders are young, male and from a minority ethnic group.

<sup>1</sup> LGA, *Implementing the new domestic violence Best Value Performance Indicator*, April 2005

The Pinnacle Project works exclusively with African Caribbean and dual heritage boys aged eight to 15 and their families. Most referrals to the project relate to behaviour issues where children are on the cusp of offending behaviour. The project aims to support and empower boys and young men as they move in to adolescence and adulthood, by working on existing strengths and helping them to make positive, informed choices

The Pinnacle model is centred upon family support work and also delivers programmes to young people, parents and carers. The project encourages the development of meaningful, healthy relationships between boys and their families (particularly fathers or other significant males) in order to increase emotional wellbeing and self-esteem. By offering intensive family support, the model provides a solution for local commissioners. As such it fits well with the Government's Think Families agenda.

The Pinnacle Project is currently the subject of an external evaluation by Salford University. Early indicators from this study show that the project is an unusual service in that it manages to completely match the ethnicity of the young people involved with the ethnicity of the workers. The practitioners and parents involved in the Pinnacle process have commented positively on the impact of a black project group working with black boys. Although the matching of worker and user ethnicities may not be essential, the evaluation seems to indicate that this was seen as very helpful in delivering positive outcomes.

The Pinnacle Project was established as a pilot to test a new model of service delivery, looking specifically at the impact on BME communities. While the learning from the research will be used to inform practice within all Action for Children's family support services, funding for this specific project will shortly come to an end. We believe the approach adopted by the Pinnacle Project is a useful innovation which should be replicated and built upon. We are keen to see local providers taking up the challenge.

Action for Children would be very happy to share the final evaluation report once this is available.

### **Challenging cultural beliefs**

Two years ago, Action for Children's consultancy services coordinated the London Community Safeguarding Children Project (funded by the DCSF). This project, commissioned by the London Safeguarding Children Board and the Metropolitan Police Service, aimed to promote awareness of safeguarding children issues amongst some of London's minority ethnic communities. Participating London boroughs each employed Community Partnership Advisers to undertake local work in raising community awareness. Early results from the project indicated that:

- Participating local authorities had acquired better knowledge of their local communities and faith groups
- The project had built trust between statutory services, communities and faith groups as well as dispelling myths and misconceptions
- The children who formed part of the local communities and faith groups reached by this project had an improved chance of being safe.

The project has also highlighted the need for coordinated information sharing and the need for statutory service training on how to respond in four key areas: female genital

mutilation, so called 'honour' based violence; abuse linked to a belief in spirit possession and child trafficking.

### **Sexualisation of girls**

Much more needs to be done to protect and support children affected by adult violence. An increasing array of good practice examples have been developed and evaluated, particularly looking at practice in agencies which specialise in reaching out to young people. This has yet to be pulled into a strategic response which is supported by secure funding and incentives to ensure consistent delivery.

### **Domestic abuse**

As practitioners, Action for Children is aware of the devastating impact of domestic abuse on the lives of children and young people. Not only do we provide specialist services for children affected by domestic abuse (such as group work programmes for children, perpetrator programmes and facilitating Domestic Violence Forums), the impact of domestic abuse is felt across the range of the services we offer. A survey of our Children's Centres showed that 80% undertake work around domestic violence. We also provide a number of Family Intervention Projects, where research has shown domestic abuse to be an underlying factor for a large proportion of the families involved. We also provide services for vulnerable young people who may be perpetrators as well as victims of domestic abuse.

Action for Children is concerned that funding for services for children and young people affected by domestic abuse often falls in the gap between children's and adult services. There is still a great need for children to access direct support, especially services that allow them the opportunity to talk in a safe environment and receive support to increase their resilience. Research shows that children and young people are remarkably consistent in what they say they need: to be safe and to have someone to talk to. We must work together to ensure the safety of children within their families, recognising the unavoidable link between the safety of the parent and the wellbeing of their children. As such agencies must work with non-abusing parents to help them to meet their families' needs.

Action for Children believes that the needs of children and young people affected by domestic abuse must be explicitly addressed within children's services and embedded within the prevention agenda for all vulnerable children. Current approaches to addressing domestic violence do not, in practice, often make the links between violence against children and domestic violence more broadly. Nor do they sufficiently address the safeguarding and support needs of children affected by domestic violence. Too often significant male figures (be they fathers, male carers, extended family members, or new partners) remain invisible within children's safeguarding processes. Information is not sought which may prove vital in terms of identifying both protective factors and risk.

We were disappointed that the consultation paper did not make reference to the work already undertaken to map out the range of services for children and young people affected by domestic violence that should be available in every local area. In 2006, the LGA, CAFCASS, Women's Aid and the ADSS developed commissioning guidance<sup>2</sup>, which was endorsed by the Home Office in its Domestic Violence Delivery Plan. However, the guidance has yet to be consistently implemented. We would urge

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<sup>2</sup> 'Vision for services for children and young people affected by domestic violence – guidance for local commissioners of children's services', LGA, ADSS, CAFCASS and Women's Aid, May 2006

the Government to re-examine this guidance rather than starting afresh to examine need.

The standards and services set out in the guidance as those which should be in place in every local area were listed as:

- Protection and safety: children and young people affected by domestic violence are identified and protected from further harm
- Services to promote wellbeing, achievement and self esteem: children and young people affected by domestic violence are able to develop to their full potential
- Early identification, assessment and information sharing: children who are vulnerable as a result of domestic violence are identified, and these children and the non-abusing parent are assured of a co-ordinated response from agencies who share information appropriately and safely
- Prevention and education: all children/young people and their parents/carers are informed about healthy relationships and the impact of violence and abuse
- Co-ordination and planning: to ensure that services for children/young people affected by domestic violence are systematically planned and co-ordinated in each local council area

### **Girls with particular vulnerabilities**

Some groups of girls and young women are particularly vulnerable to abuse and exploitation. Effective responses will need to identify and address these heightened vulnerabilities. For example, the needs of girls and young women in, or about to leave, the care system need to be addressed – particularly as we know that they are more likely to be vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

The available UK evidence on the extent of abuse among disabled children suggests that they are at increased risk of abuse. Some of the reasons for this include that: disabled children living away from home have fewer outside contacts than other children; they may receive intimate personal care, possibly from a number of carers; or they have communication difficulties making it difficult to tell others what is happening. Analysis of one English County Council's child protection register found that, although disabled children made up only 2% of the local child population, they accounted for 10% of children on the register.<sup>3</sup>

### **Sexual abuse and disabled children**

Disabled children are particularly vulnerable to all forms of abuse. Research suggests that they may be 3.1 times more likely to experience sexual abuse<sup>4</sup>. There is a specific vulnerability in the learning disabled and deaf populations<sup>5</sup>. Power inequalities, physical vulnerability, communication differences and denial are among contributory factors. It also appears that disabled children are less likely to receive therapeutic interventions.

<sup>3</sup> Morris, J. (1999) 'Disabled children, child protection systems and the Children Act', *Child Abuse Review*, 8, 91-108.

<sup>4</sup> Sullivan and Knutson 2000

<sup>5</sup> Fyson (2005) and Kennedy (1989)

Action for Children is working in partnership with the Royal Holloway College to look at the referral rates and mechanisms for children with disabilities to child sexual abuse services. The aim is to identify how many children with disabilities are accessing Action for Children's sexual abuse services, and whether this is representative of prevalence of sexual abuse in this population. We also want to understand whether commissioners of Action for Children's sexual abuse services refer children with disabilities to these services and, if not, why not.

This research will also examine service responses and seek to identify and share best practice. We are hoping that the research findings will be available later in 2009.

### **Physical punishment**

Action for Children is concerned about the level of legal protection children have against assault. We believe that the law in this area is still confused and does not provide equity between children and young people and adults. Currently, adults enjoy greater legal protection from the threat of assault than children.

### **How can we all better pick up on, and respond to, early signs of violence?**

Identifying and responding to early signs of violence is everybody's responsibility. The danger is that without a co-ordinated response something that is so obviously everybody's responsibility can become nobody's responsibility.

An effective response will include providing advice to the general public, as well as to all professionals who come into contact with children and young people in the course of their work.

Within Action for Children, our *Safeguarding Framework for Children and Young People* is the over-arching policy and procedure for protecting our service users from harm. The policy and related guidance is a significant part of every new employees induction, ongoing training, supervision and appraisal programmes. Within the safeguarding framework we have developed specific guidance for working with children and young people affected by domestic abuse.

As providers of universal early years services, it is essential that our staff are trained to pick up on the early signs of violence and know how to respond. Most of our services are provided in a partnership context and here clear, comprehensive and simple multi-agency safeguarding arrangements are essential to ensure that once early indicators of violence are picked up they can be acted upon effectively.

As a major provider of Sure Start Children's Centres (SSCCs) our staff members have highlighted some concerns about the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements that currently operate within some SSCCs. For example, we have concerns that within some SSCCs each agency has a separate file for each child. We believe that this is a very risky practice and, in fact, it has already been identified in some serious case reviews. In our response to the consultation looking at putting SSCCs onto a statutory basis we made the following suggestions:

- We want to see clear lines of accountability for safeguarding within SSCCs developed for all staff and volunteers.
- When setting up a SSCC it must be made clear which agency's policies and procedures are to be followed. There must be clarity about both management and professional advice to workers, and the role of supervision.
- There must be agreement on the expectations for staff regarding safeguarding training and competency and this must be regularly monitored.

- Each SSCC should have a designated lead on safeguarding (similar to that in schools)
- The role of SSCCs in safeguarding should be recognised both by the SSCC itself and in the wider safeguarding network.

We believe that agencies are still not working together effectively to manage risk. What is needed is a shared culture across agency boundaries. Recent changes in guidance and legislation, especially the moves to strengthen Children's Trusts, are steps in the right direction but have not yet achieved the necessary cultural change on the ground.

Action for Children believes it is important to improve information sharing between children's services agencies because this is a pre-requisite for effective joint working. We believe that information sharing systems have the greatest chance of success when the criteria on which they are based are open and transparent.

Action for Children is keen to see the results of pilot schemes sharing information about those who sexually offend against children with local parents. However, many offenders are not known to statutory services. It is important that parents do not solely rely on this list but remain vigilant and aware of the types of behaviours that offenders use to gain the trust of adults and children alike and ensure their child knows they can discuss any concerns they might have.

### **How best can we keep track of the most serious offenders, and reduce the risks those individuals pose?**

There is a relative lack of provision of services for children and young people who display harmful sexual behaviour, especially considering that one third of all sexual offences are committed by young people under 18 years old. This important preventative work is undermined because service provision is patchy; yet there are some beacons of good practice.

Action for Children believes that priority should be given to developing effective services aimed at young perpetrators of domestic and sexual violence. We would like to see a national strategy for the assessment and treatment of children and young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour.

Action for Children has also called for the management of young people who sexually offend to be more closely linked to children's services, with supportive services provided that can reduce the risk of re-offending. Essentially, we believe that young people who sexually offend should be seen as children in need, with more consistent assessment, information sharing and intervention processes established. Every child or young person who sexually harms must have an assessment that looks at their needs as well as their risk. This should indicate what interventions they need and what needs to be done to reduce risk. This should then inform any interagency decisions about disclosure.

In addition, a number of our services have continued to flag ongoing concerns about the implementation of contact arrangements where there may be a risk to the child or young person. We believe that children in private law cases need the same rights to protection and services as children in public law cases. Welfare and safety must be paramount with better safeguards for children built in before enforcing contact arrangements. Current arrangements are not sufficient to safeguard children.

Further work is also needed to ensure that domestic violence, multi-agency risk management and safety planning processes specifically address the needs of

children affected by domestic violence. All of this work will require leadership from the local authority, but with support built in from other key agencies under robust partnership arrangements.

**What kind of services would you expect to receive from the health service/or social services if you were a victims of violence?**

In relation to domestic abuse, please see our response to the question: *Are we doing enough to protect and support children affected by adult violence?*

Action for Children is also concerned that the support needs of children who have been sexually abused often go unmet. Currently, the demand for these therapeutic services far outstrips supply.

We believe that the government must work to improve the availability of, and access to, therapeutic support services for children and young people who have been sexually abused. Work is also needed to co-ordinate specialist training and advice for health, education and social care professionals to help them improve their responses to children and young people who have been sexually abused.

Therapeutic support services are essential for those children and their families who are not served by statutory mental health services. For example, many children in care have been abused but lack access to treatment once the presenting 'crisis' has been 'resolved' by admission to care.

Action for Children runs eight projects across England and Wales that specialise in supporting and treating children, young people and their families who have been affected by sexual abuse. In 2007, 553 children/young people were provided with a service across the eight projects. Yet we know that supply does not meet demand – currently children are left with a post code lottery as to whether they receive a service or not. A general theme for our service managers is the awareness of the demand for services far outweighing what they are able to offer, with most projects struggling to manage waiting lists.

Our projects have developed different intervention models to meet the diverse needs of the children and families referred to their service. There is not a 'one size fits all' approach to service provision. The services offered include direct work with parents (including foster carers and adoptive parents), group work, specific services for minority ethnic groups, and work with children and young people displaying sexually harmful behaviours and a range of more traditional individual therapeutic treatment models. Projects offer a range of therapeutic treatments, including counselling, play therapy, art therapy, cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) and psychotherapy. The projects ensure that the children and young people they are in contact with have a trusted individual available whom they can talk to about (or express in other ways) the abuse they have experienced in the knowledge that they will be listened to and believed. A common view expressed by children and young people is that no-one wants to hear when children tell adults about abuse. Most projects also provide a consultation service to local professionals.

An important element of the service Action for Children provides is to ready children/young people for therapeutic treatment. Here a flexible approach is essential as some young people need a bridge to prepare them for therapy. This can include play, art or sporting activities that act as a mediator into a more traditional talking therapy.

## **Action for Children New Beginnings**

New Beginnings operates on the belief that children and young people who have been sexually abused or exploited should have the support they need to come to terms with what has happened to them and the opportunities they need to reach their full potential.

The project offers an assessment of individual needs; support for family and carers; work with other professionals to help support the young person; individual work; and group work for boys and girls of different ages. They also run carers groups for women, men and couples.

For example, last year one of the groups they ran was a girls group comprising of five girls ranging in age from 9 -14 years; all of whom had been sexually abused by a male in their family. After initial assessments, the work started by devising a group mascot which helped to give the girls a sense of ownership of the group. Attendance at group meetings was very high and the interaction and support given amongst group members was good with the girls feeling able to disclose how they had been affected. Thoughts, feelings, actions and consequences were looked at, and distorted thinking unravelled. Feelings of blame and shame were gradually lessened and throughout the sessions the girls learnt how to feel more positive about them. Understanding the way the body works and being given clear, honest answers helped them unravel confusion. They also learnt about how they, and in many cases their families, were groomed and about how to keep safe in the future. Being in a group enabled them to realise that they are not alone and that their thoughts and feeling were shared by others and were completely normal after their experiences.

Action for Children's child sexual abuse services are currently the subject of an external evaluation by Canterbury Christchurch University. The results of this research should help develop our understanding of the effectiveness of interventions with survivors of child sexual abuse. This is important, particularly as existing evidence on effective interventions within the UK remains patchy.

### **How can central government, local government and other service providers' best work together to promote better consistency and quality of provision in services for victims of violence against women across England?**

We very much welcome the cross-government approach adopted in the consultation paper. Complex issues such as domestic and sexual violence cannot be tackled by agencies working in isolation. It is vital that the collaborative approach needed at a local level is replicated nationally. Incentives for multi-agency approaches must be built into the system.

We are delighted that the paper pays tribute to the role of the voluntary and third sector – particularly the women's voluntary sector. In building on this work, the central role of local partnerships and local authorities in identifying need and co-ordinating service delivery should be highlighted. The consultation paper identifies inconsistencies in local responses and insecurities in the funding of services as the key challenges going forward. We would urge the Government to consider the incentives in the local commissioning framework, especially at a time when public spending is likely to be increasingly constrained.

Research is needed that clearly demonstrates the costs to local services (health, social care etc) of violence against women and girls. To date, major national studies have focused on costs to the criminal justice system which is less persuasive to local partnerships and local authorities when making the argument to prioritise these services.

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