

**CHILD NEGLECT:  
THE SCANDAL THAT  
NEVER BREAKS**

March 2014



Action for Children works with over 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through 650 services across the UK. We are committed to helping the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential. Over the past six years we have developed our evidence base on child neglect, campaigned for change and used our knowledge and experience to support practitioners and develop innovative services to help neglected children.

All the quotes in this report from children, young people and parents are taken from focus groups run as part of our Annual Review of Child Neglect in partnership with the University of Stirling. All names have been anonymised.

# Contents

1. Summary	1
2. What is neglect?	3
3. What has Action for Children done to help neglected children?	4
4. What needs to happen?	6
5. Are children and young people able to seek and get help?	8
6. Are parents able to seek and accept help?	11
7. Can the public report their concerns about neglected children?	14
8. Are professionals able to help neglected children?	16
9. Do local authorities know the scale of child neglect in their area?	21
10. Do local authorities effectively help neglected children?	23
11. Does national policy and guidance help tackle child neglect?	27
12. A national strategy for child neglect	29
13. Endnotes	30

## Summary

**‘Sometimes no-one believes you. No-one comes to your house to see what’s going on. So no-one might know or can tell from the outside.’**

(Chloe, young person)

Neglect is the most common form of child abuse in the UK today. Up to one in 10 children across the UK suffers from neglect, it is the most frequent reason for a child protection referral, and it features in 60 per cent of serious case reviews into the death or serious injury of a child.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the scale of the problem, and the devastating impact that neglect has on children’s lives, it does not receive the political attention it deserves. The Government does not have a strategy to tackle child neglect.

There is much that could and should be done to tackle child neglect. In the majority of cases parents can be supported to change their behaviour and improve their parenting. Yet there remain unnecessary barriers that prevent cases of neglect being dealt with:

1. The professionals most qualified to tackle child neglect are also those most frustrated that they cannot help. Social workers routinely have to wait
2. The general public are increasingly aware of child neglect, but too many people don’t know where to go to report their concerns
3. Parents are often wary of seeking help to improve their parenting. Because of basic communication problems, they may not know about the services that are available to help them in their area
4. Local areas do not collect accurate data about child neglect and so do not commission services based on the scale of local need
5. Children themselves recognise the signs of neglect among their friends and classmates, but they are worried about telling people and are rarely asked about their concerns

These issues can be resolved. With a strategic and joined-up approach to intervening as early as possible we can tackle the problem of child neglect.

It is time for the Government to take a lead and produce a strategy to tackle child neglect.

**‘I think it’s the adults who need to approach children if they think something’s not right, it’s not up to the children to approach them. It can be a big burden for a child to ask for help.’**

(Logan, young person)

# What is neglect?

A child experiences neglect when the adults who look after them fail to meet their needs.

Neglect can take many forms. It could be a parent allowing their child to suffer serious harm on a one-off occasion or failing to care for them over a long period. It can be emotional as well as physical with children not receiving basic daily care, emotional warmth, stimulation or guidance and boundaries.

Neglected children can be left alone in the house or streets for a long time. They can lack proper health care, be ignored when distressed, or even when excited or happy.

Neglect has far reaching consequences affecting all aspects of a child's development. It has negative and long-term effects on brain and other physical development, influences behaviour, educational achievement and children's emotional wellbeing.

Neglect can mean that children have trouble making and keeping relationships. It can have an impact on how they parent their own children. One study found that 80 per cent of neglected children have some form of attachment disorder.<sup>2</sup>

Neglect can be life threatening and in some cases children die because of it. It was a factor in 60 per cent of all reviews in to the deaths and serious injuries of a child. It can affect children and young people of all ages and includes deaths related to malnutrition, medical neglect, preventable accidents and suicide among young people. It was a feature in over a quarter of child homicides and fatal physical assaults.<sup>3</sup>

Neglect often occurs alongside other family problems including mental health issues, substance misuse or living with domestic violence.

For a child suffering from neglect, life can be horrific. Young people told us that they feel depressed, unloved and invisible.<sup>4</sup>

# What has Action for Children done to help neglected children?

Our history of helping vulnerable children means that we see first hand the terrible impact neglect can have on children's lives. For over six years, we have focused on tackling child neglect as it continues to be a damaging problem for not only the children living with it, but also those who want to help them.

We know that to bring about positive change for neglected children, we have to evidence the size of the problem and what works to help. So, we worked in partnership with the University of Stirling over the past four years to undertake reviews of the state of child neglect across the UK<sup>5</sup> and set out the impact, causes and responses to child neglect.<sup>6</sup>

We also reviewed the research evidence on effective practice and went on to commission the University of Salford to complete a four-year evaluation of our services that help neglected children.<sup>7</sup>

Through this project we developed the Action for Children Neglect Assessment Tool (adapted from the Graded Care Profile) to help professionals analyse how severe concerns are about a neglected child.

It guides professionals in working with parents to make changes and also provides a valuable source of evidence for assessment and review.

We identified a gap in services to tackle early signs of neglect. In response, we developed our innovative Action for Children Family Partners service where we work intensively with families where there are early concerns about neglect.

Professionals can struggle to understand neglect and know how they can best help children. So, we:

- ▶ produced Action on Neglect,<sup>8</sup> in partnership with the University of Stirling, to support practitioners to provide the best possible response to children who are experiencing neglect
- ▶ developed training resources with the University of Stirling for professionals on child neglect that were published by the Department of Education in England<sup>9</sup> and the Scottish Government<sup>10</sup>
- ▶ support our own staff through regular internal safeguarding conferences and webinars

- ▶ worked with York Consulting to develop competencies for staff to work with vulnerable parents, as well as for working with young people to help them keep themselves safe
- ▶ implemented our Lead Practitioner initiative which incorporates a reflective approach to supervision, as advocated by Professor Munro, which allows staff time and space to share and learn from others

We recognised that there are differences in the criminal law and guidance under the civil law on neglect which means that professionals who come into contact with child neglect are working within different legal frameworks. So we campaigned to update the criminal law on child neglect, particularly so that it includes emotional neglect.

## What needs to happen?

Children seek and accept help

Parents seek and accept help

The public reports concerns about child neglect

Professionals are able to identify neglect and help children at the earliest possible stage

Local authorities know the scale of neglect in their areas and commission effective services to tackle it

National legislation, guidance and regulations enable a joined-up, long-term approach to helping neglected children

**Neglected children get the help they need**

Children and young people tell us that they are unsure whether to seek help and are fearful of the consequences. Seventy three per cent of young people across the UK know a child who has shown signs of neglect;

for example not having friends to play with, looking unwashed or not getting meals at home. Three in 10 have been worried about whether a child is being looked after properly.<sup>11</sup>

In the majority of cases of child neglect, parents can be supported to change their behaviour and improve their parenting skills. Yet, there remain unnecessary barriers that prevent parents seeking help in the first place.

The general public is increasingly aware of child neglect, but more must be done to encourage them to come forward and report their concerns.

The professionals most qualified to tackle child neglect are also those most frustrated that they cannot help. Social workers, police and other professionals must be able to intervene as soon as concerns about child neglect are raised.

Neglect is the most common form of child abuse. Yet local areas do not collect data about the scale of the problem. Local areas need to be aware of the extent of child neglect so that they plan appropriate services. There is a varied picture of how effective local areas are at doing this.<sup>12</sup>

Accurate data must inform the commissioning of a range of services to balance early help and crisis intervention.

To drive change in all of these areas, we need urgent action led by the Government. There must be an ambitious, strategic national approach that will provide a coherent and unified basis to tackle child neglect.

A national strategy is needed to drive a shift to early intervention so that all professionals can take action across the spectrum of need from prevention to acute responses.

**The Government must produce a child neglect strategy.**

**‘The Government needs to listen. Sometimes even to angry people; as there could be really good reasons underneath about why people are angry.’**

**(Cameron, young person)**

# Are children and young people able to seek and get help?

**‘It is good to talk about stuff to the workers here. If I keep things in I explode.’**

(Elijah, young person)

Children and young people tell us that they are unsure whether to seek help and are fearful of the consequences.

Seventy three per cent of children and young people across the UK know a child who has shown signs of neglect; for example is often late or missing from school, does not have friends to play with, has parents who do not know where they are, or does not get meals at home. Three in 10 have been worried about whether a child is being looked after properly.<sup>13</sup>

Professionals need the skills, time and confidence to notice and act on the signs of neglect. Rather than waiting for the child to tell them about it.

## What are the barriers to children and young people seeking and getting help?

Young people most often come to the attention of services through their behaviour and demeanour, rather than explicitly

disclosing abuse. The older children get, the better able they are to recognise neglect often starting with an emotional awareness that something isn't right, before they are able to articulate the problem to themselves or others.<sup>14</sup>

**‘Some kids don't realise they are neglected until they get to primary school - because it has just been their life, so teachers need to ask.’**

(Sophia, young person)

Children and young people seek help in different ways, sometimes talking to friends or relatives, sometimes seeking advice through the internet or via a phone line. They may test out help seeking, finally choosing to speak to a professional when they want action to be taken.<sup>15</sup>

Ultimately most want a face-to-face conversation with someone they can trust. This could be a friend, relative or teacher. Children and young people told us about what stops them from going to adults for help:<sup>16</sup>

- ▶ Being unsure whether the adult could be trusted to keep confidences and not tell other adults or the young person's parents
- ▶ Not knowing whether the adult is a 'safe person' to talk to
- ▶ Uncertainty about whether the adult has time to listen and what their reaction will be to what they are told
- ▶ Uncertainty about whether the adult has training to be able to help
- ▶ Fear of the story being 'twisted' in some way if relayed to others
- ▶ Fear of other children finding out and being teased or bullied

Children and young people may be seeking help for one of their friends or a peer that they are concerned about. Yet among the children we spoke to who had been worried about another child, only 52 per cent told someone about it. Often the reasons for not speaking out were because children were not sure if it was a problem or because they did not have any proof.

## What would support children and young people to seek and get help?

**'If you see an unhappy kid you should ask them what is wrong.'**

**(Mason, young person)**

Research indicates that most children want to seek help through a conversation with a 'safe adult'. Forty seven per cent of young people said that having a safe adult to talk to would help a child they had been worried about.<sup>17</sup> Children need to know who these safe adults are and be confident that something will happen if they do talk to them.

Children and young people need to be reassured that they can talk openly, without fear of their story being distorted or that the person won't do anything about their concerns. Young people value professionals they can trust and who are effective, knowledgeable and available.<sup>18</sup>

Through our delivery of services, we have learnt what works best in making sure neglected children and young people seek and get help. We know that good, consistent relationships with skilled professionals are key. They help young people to talk through the things that are worrying them, as well as navigate appropriate boundaries and making safe decisions.<sup>19</sup>

Often children do not explicitly disclose neglect. So adults they come into contact with need to be prepared to open up conversations that enable children to speak out.

This means giving professionals, often early years workers, teachers and health staff, the confidence to use their skills and expertise in speaking to children. They need to be proactive and ask young people about abuse in a direct and appropriate way.<sup>20</sup>

Young people told us that adults need to actively make themselves available and ask the right questions in a non-threatening way. This also means having the time to react and being supported in doing so.

**‘Schools and teachers are supposed to help and they can. But sometimes they are too stressed and busy.’**

**(Kylie, young person)**

Professionals who come into daily contact with children need to have the resources to support neglected children. Teachers and school staff are well placed to identify neglect and help children. One way of enabling them to do this would be to open up the pupil premium so that additional help can be given to neglected children. Local Safeguarding Children’s Boards can help schools to get support for neglected children right, for example through training and providing

resources on where children can go to get help or what to do if they are worried about a friend.

### **A Government strategy on child neglect must include measures to:**

- ▶ Open up the pupil premium so that schools are able to effectively align resources to help neglected children

# Are parents able to seek and accept help?

**‘It is really difficult to get help. You go to somewhere and then you don’t meet the criteria. But we don’t know what the criteria are, no one ever tells us.’**

**(Jason, parent)**

In the majority of cases of child neglect, parents can be supported to change their behaviour and improve their parenting skills. Yet, there remain barriers that prevent parents from seeking help in the first place.

Learning to be a parent can be hard. The parents we spoke to in our family support services said this can be the case particularly if you are parenting alone or have no-one to call on for support. Asking for help can also be hard. Especially as many parents that need help may themselves experienced neglect in their own childhoods.

## **What are the barriers to parents seeking and accepting help?**

Research<sup>21</sup> shows that asking for help can be a complex and difficult process influenced by several factors which contribute to how parents think about their situation and whether or not they decide to ask for help. This includes whether parents think there is a problem or not, whether they believe anyone can help them, and what they think

the consequences of seeking help from statutory services might be.

Parents may not have the confidence to ask for help. They may be concerned about the stigma attached to admitting something is wrong. They can find the process of getting help stressful especially, as many do not then get the service they feel they need.

**‘It’s hard to ask for help. They don’t give it until they decide we need it.’**

**(Barbara, parent)**

Lack of information about who to go to for help can prevent parents seeking support if they are worried about a child. Forty per cent of parents surveyed said that they want more information on who to go to for help.<sup>22</sup>

Some parents may not accept help when there are concerns about child neglect because they do not think they are doing anything wrong. Some adults, who have experienced seriously impaired levels of

parenting themselves, can replicate this with their own children.<sup>23</sup> Chaotic family lifestyles and the strong over-lap between neglect and other family problems such as substance misuse and mental health problems, can reduce parents' ability to recognise their children's needs.

**'Maybe the mum has a boyfriend who wants all the attention and the mum might feel intimidated. He might ask her to go to the pub and she has to go and then the kids get left alone. He gets the priority. And the kids are frightened to tell anyone, that's hard.'**

(Jack, young person)

## **What would help parents to seek and accept help?**

The parents that we spoke to about child neglect identified common characteristics and approaches which made it easier for them to seek and accept help. They told us that they wanted to be listened to and asked what they thought they needed, rather than being told. They stressed the need for professionals to be accessible and they wanted to be given a clear explanation of what was happening and what needed to change.<sup>24</sup>

Parents value professionals who spend time with them. As with children and young people, a stable relationship with a consistent professional is important.

A lack of information about what is available prevents parents from seeking early support. Children's centres are ideally placed to help. Sixteen per cent of parents who have used children's centres within the last five years received advice on parenting skills.<sup>25</sup>

But not all children's centres actually know about the vulnerable children who live in their area. They need this information to reach out and offer support to those parents who need it. This can be sorted out by centres being given local birth data.

Help seeking by parents who are concerned about neglect needs to be accessible and non-stigmatised. Services need to be available when the parents can access them; this might be in the evening or at the weekend. Schools were highlighted by parents as a place where they feel they should be able to get information and ask for help.

We know from our direct work with neglected children and their families what works in getting parents to accept help. A four-year evaluation<sup>26</sup> of our services that work with neglected children reinforced the need for the worker to gain the trust of parents so that they share information on other

problems such as substance misuse. In cases where a sudden event increases the level of concern, the worker reviews the assessment, revises the plan and demonstrates to parents how to react positively and effectively to the new problems.

Parents also commented on the positive effect of the persistence of our workers and the impact it had on their own resolve to provide better parenting for their children.

### **A Government strategy on child neglect must include measures to:**

- ▶ Ensure that all children's centres have birth data for all children in their local area
- ▶ Ensure that all maternity services and health visitors have up-to-date information about local parenting support services to give to all new parents as part of their child's personal health record

# Can the public report their concerns about neglected children?

**‘I would want to see whether or not my fears appear to be justified by getting a second opinion from someone I trust.’**

(Trinity, member of the public<sup>27</sup>)

The public is increasingly aware of child neglect, but they don’t always come forward and report their concerns.

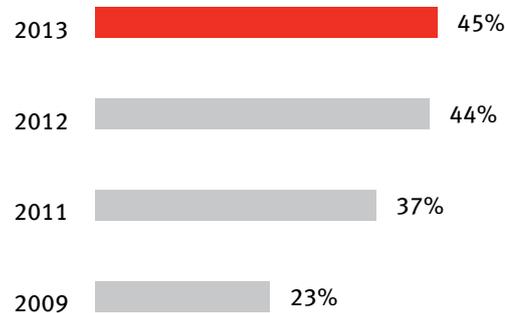
## What are the barriers to the general public seeking and getting help?

Ninety four per cent of the public we polled<sup>28</sup> agreed that people should do something when they have concerns that a child is being neglected. But of those who had been ‘very’ or ‘quite worried’ about a child, around one third (35%) decided not to tell anyone about their concerns. The most common reason why is because they ‘didn’t have any proof/evidence’ (29%). They were also worried about repercussions and causing trouble if they were wrong (15%).

The fact that members of the public do not tell anyone when they are concerned about a child is worrying as it means problems may need to get worse before someone feels confident to take action.

Just under half of the public (45%) say that they do not have enough information about who to contact if they are concerned about a child. This has risen steadily from 23 per cent in 2009. The majority of those surveyed (52%) would use a Government website for advice and to report their concerns about the welfare of a child.

## I want more information on child neglect



Base: All UK adults answering they would like more information (2013 n=888)

## What would help the public to seek and access help?

The public want different ways of seeking information and help. There need to be clear and easy ways for them to do this including a website, a dedicated helpline and the ability to speak to a professional. The current system in England doesn't provide a single, national place for the public to go if they are concerned about a child.

Information needs to be easily available on the internet. The WithScotland website is a model that could be replicated in England. It provides basic information on child neglect and has a facility for the public to report concerns about a child directly to the relevant council area via a postcode function. Rather than having to search through many different routes to access help.

## A Government strategy on child neglect must include measures to:

- ▶ Introduce a web-portal for the public to seek help for children they are worried about. It should include a facility to report concerns about a child directly to the relevant council area via a postcode function
- ▶ Run a public awareness campaign on where parents and the public can go to get help about child neglect

# Are professionals able to help neglected children?

**‘Children are suffering significant harm due to thresholds, lack of resources, constant changes in social workers and staff sickness. There’s a danger of issues being missed and children being lost in the system.’**

(Jan, social worker<sup>29</sup>)

The professionals most qualified to tackle child neglect are also those most frustrated that they cannot help. Social workers, police and other professionals must be able to intervene as soon as concerns about child neglect are raised.

These professionals are performing high-pressure jobs where decisions can have a massive effect on a child’s life. The Munro Review advocated for professionals to be equipped to do their jobs and to be trained to make the best judgements they can to help children.<sup>30</sup> This section looks at why professionals remain under pressure and what can be done to help them.

## Professionals under pressure to intervene

For the past five years we have commissioned online surveys of professionals across the UK.<sup>31</sup> These include teachers, early

years professionals, social workers, health professionals and the police.

Of all professionals surveyed in 2013, nearly a third (32%) report feeling under more pressure to intervene in cases of suspected child neglect than they did five years ago. This figure was 29 per cent in 2012 and 31 per cent in 2011.

Asked why they felt more pressure to intervene, the majority replied that there has been an increase in the media coverage of high profile child neglect cases (68%). This is reflected in the next most common reason; a concern for the poor perception of their profession if cases are not reported (43%).

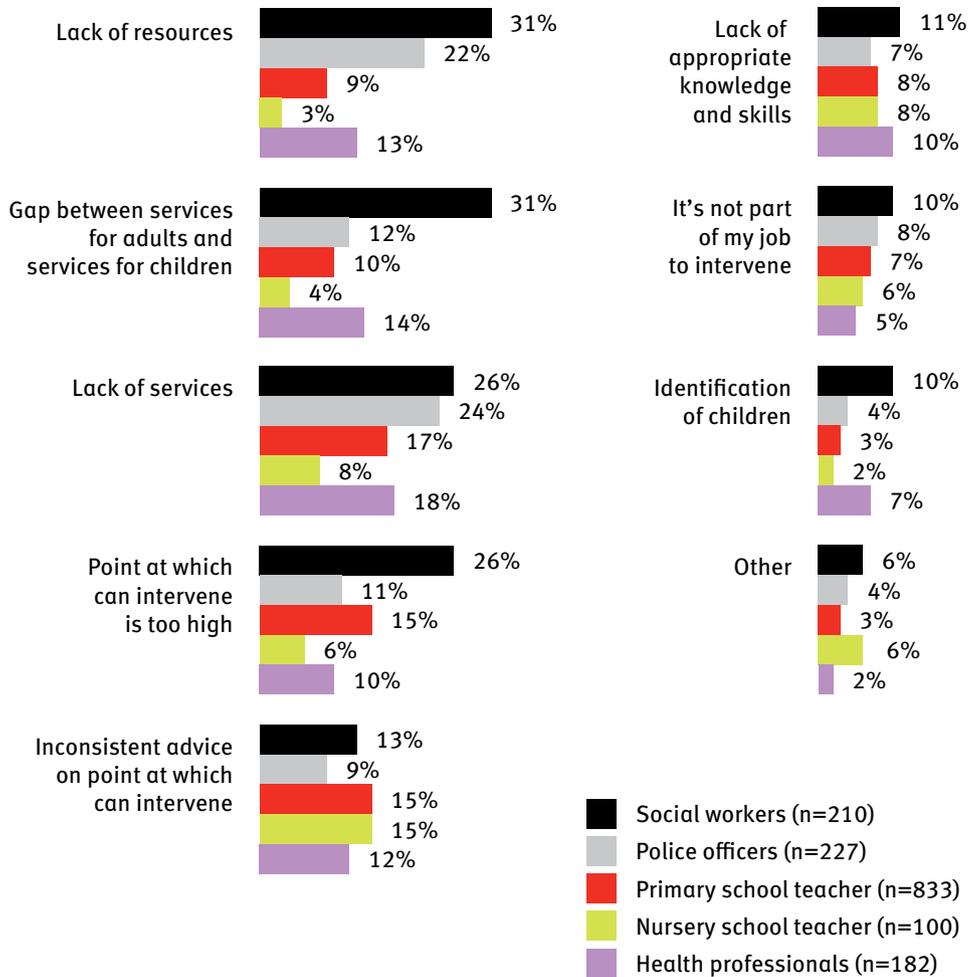
## **Professionals feeling powerless to intervene**

We also asked professionals if they have felt able to intervene in cases of suspected child neglect. Since 2011, around a third said that they feel powerless to intervene. In 2013, social workers were the most likely to feel powerless (43%), followed by primary school teachers (36%) and nursery school teachers (27%). The reasons for this were other professionals not taking their concerns seriously enough and the family not engaging.

## **Barriers to intervention**

We asked professionals what barriers have prevented them from helping neglected children.

## Which, if any, of the following barriers have ever prevented you from helping a child you suspect of neglect?



Rigid and rising thresholds for intervention stand in the way of helping neglected children. The idea of a threshold has developed over time and can be seen as a line on a scaled order of need. For example, a child needs to reach a certain level to be classified as a 'Child in Need'. However, this theoretically straightforward concept is problematic when 'the real world is not so neatly ordered'.<sup>32</sup>

At the same time that professionals in universal services are under increasing pressure to identify, respond to and refer on suspected cases of neglect, budgets are reducing. Thresholds are used as a way of rationing resources; creating an artificial cut off point.

This results in children getting stuck in a place where someone is worrying about them but cannot access help on their behalf. The child getting help in response to their individual needs should be at the heart of any decision making, rather than a risk averse system that encourages children to be referred upwards only to find that the people they have been referred to lack the resources to help them.

## What would help professionals to take action?

**'I had a child who was repeatedly neglected with other professionals raising concerns. However, child protection thresholds were not met and the child was deemed a Child in Need.'**

(Darren, social worker<sup>33</sup>)

Our research found that high numbers of professionals in universal services, such as primary teachers, early years workers and health visitors, are noticing large numbers of potentially neglected children. It is encouraging that practitioners from an increasingly diverse range of professions are becoming alert to children who require additional support. There is also greater awareness of the wide-ranging effects of neglect upon all aspects of children's development.<sup>34</sup>

Nearly four in 10 (38%) children and young people would prefer to speak to someone at their school either face-to-face or over the telephone if they had worries about another child. However, education professionals told us that they have anxieties about being able to deliver adequate levels of help to the numbers of children with high needs. Funding cuts and an emphasis on learning and attainment in schools were also seen as threats to welfare-focused work.<sup>35</sup>

To successfully deliver a joined-up system, agencies need to know what their individual responsibilities are to help neglected children and be able to work better together. Teachers and others working in schools need to have the confidence to talk to children when they have concerns about neglect and know what they themselves can do to help. Clarity around this role would support this to happen.

Around one in 10 (12%) police officers see weekly cases of suspected child neglect but the out-dated criminal law on child neglect means that they are working to a different framework from social workers and other professionals. Sixty nine per cent of police officers in England and Wales believe emotional cruelty towards a child should be a criminal offence. Bringing the criminal law up-to-date would create a common language across the criminal and civil legal systems and make multi-agency work to prevent child neglect easier.

Children need a joined-up system that responds at every level of need. The perceived problem with thresholds can be addressed by ensuring that in each case there is clarity about the severity of the neglect and what different professionals can do to help.

Professionals need to have the backing to make difficult decisions. This requires strong leadership with professionals being given the tools they need to speak out and get neglected children the right help as early as possible.

### **A Government strategy on child neglect must include measures to:**

- ▶ Update the criminal law on child neglect to include emotional harm, and bring it into line with the definition of neglect under Working Together to Safeguard Children
- ▶ Introduce an early help duty on local authorities to secure the sufficient provision of local early help services for children, young and people and families

# Do local authorities know the scale of child neglect in their area?

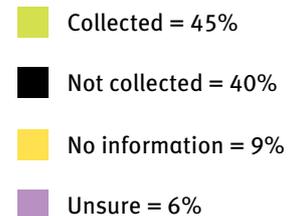
**Neglect is the most common form of child abuse. Yet local areas don't know the scale of the problem. Local areas need to be aware of the extent of child neglect so they plan and deliver appropriate services. There is a varied picture of how effective local areas are at doing this.**<sup>36</sup>

## Knowing the scale of the problem

Individually, professionals across universal and targeted services are recognising the signs of child neglect. Eighty per cent of those we polled in universal roles said they have suspected or come into contact with a child that has been neglected.<sup>37</sup> The figure for pre-school and nursery staff increased from 60 per cent in 2012 to 65 per cent in 2013.<sup>38</sup>

Yet local areas continue to struggle to effectively identify the scale of neglect across their area because it is not included as an individual category in data sets. Neglect needs to be explicitly recorded. This is the case in the Children in Need census where 'abuse or neglect' continues to be the most common reason (47%) why children are deemed to be in need as part of the initial assessment.<sup>39</sup> This means that the true scale of neglect can remain hidden.

Are areas collecting statistics over and above child protection register statistics?<sup>40</sup>



There is clearly a need for more consistent reporting methods that capture the scope of neglect both across agencies and across areas. Our survey of local areas found that they do not routinely collect data about the early signs of neglect. Most areas do not routinely collect data about the children of parents who come to the attention of adult services.<sup>41</sup>

Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs) are well-placed to gather information on neglect from all partners to develop a more accurate picture of what is needed to help. This information should be used to inform a local child neglect plan.

There needs to be consistent statistical reporting and data collection if local areas are to plan services that effectively respond to child neglect. Local decision-making must be based on a thorough area-based needs assessment with data on neglect central to this.

Once they have a good understanding of the needs they are seeking to address, local areas must deliver effective services at every tier of need.

## **A Government strategy on child neglect must include measures to:**

- ▶ Update LSCB Regulations 2006 so that LSCBs have a function to collect full information on child neglect to inform a local child neglect plan

# Do local authorities effectively help neglected children?

We know more than ever before about what works in helping children and families where there are concerns about neglect, especially how to work effectively at the early onset of problems. But, local areas do not collect accurate data about the scope and scale child neglect, and so not commission services based on local need. This must be rectified to achieve a shift to early intervention so that all professionals can take action across the spectrum of need from prevention to acute responses.

With a strategic and joined-up approach to intervening as early as possible we can tackle the problem of child neglect.

## Assessment leading to action for neglected children

We are getting better at noticing neglected children and recognising the scale and severity of the problem. But, we need to ensure that identification and assessment leads to action. This means something positive changing for the child who is experiencing neglect.

In order to address neglect effectively our research<sup>42</sup> found that there needs to be:

- ▶ Proactive, multi-disciplinary assessment
- ▶ Staff who are confident enough to identify early which families are unable to make the necessary changes
- ▶ A focus on addressing causes not symptoms
- ▶ An understanding of family histories and patterns
- ▶ Robust assessments that match interventions to identified needs with clear objectives and built in review timescales

Professionals need to work with families and children to assess what is wrong and what will work best to make things better. There are good, evidence-based tools to help professionals to make judgements and work with families using a strengths-based approach. But they are not consistently used. There is also scope to develop the evidence base on effective responses to best tackle child neglect.

A four-year research study<sup>44</sup> found that the Action for Children Neglect Assessment Tool helps professionals assess and tackle neglect. The Action for Children Neglect Assessment Tool could be used in all local areas.

## **Providing effective help as early as possible**

After a neglected child's needs have been assessed, it is vital that they get the right help. Neglect affects every part of children's lives so they need support to develop in every domain. Intervention has to be within a model that does not split 'child protection' from 'family support'; effective family support is protection, effective protection is supportive.

Services, such as Action for Children's Family Partners, that use a strengths-based approach to challenge and work with a family have been shown to be effective in addressing early concerns about child neglect.

## Action for Children Family Partners

Action for Children Family Partners service is targeted at helping families in a timely way as soon as concerns have been expressed and before there has been an escalation to a formal child protection referral. Trained staff work with families where there are concerns around possible neglect. Action for Children Family Partners work with families for 22 weeks, on average, progressing through three phases; engagement, making changes and moving on. Common issues addressed are around establishing boundaries for, and relationships, with children and their parents/carers.

Action for Children Family Partners provide the trusting relationship with parents while maintaining an element of challenge to the family. They work with families to identify together what their strengths are how best to improve their lives. The service not only provides support but challenge to families. We have learnt through our delivery, that Action for Children Family Partners works best when it is built into existing service provision as part of a continuum of services, e.g. a children's centre or young carers service.

### Impact

In a sample of 25 children whose families received intensive support during the pilot period, improvement was recorded against 86 per cent of the outcomes that were goals for work with those particular children. This included specific outcomes aimed at overcoming neglect:

- ▶ 72% experienced an improvement in their emotional wellbeing
- ▶ 68% saw indicators of neglect addressed and concerns about the child reduced
- ▶ 56% of children were assessed as feeling safer within their family network

Where families struggled to change and children's lives didn't get any better, evidence was gathered and the child was moved quickly into alternative care arrangements.

## Knowing what works

Having identified the scale of the problem and commissioned services to tackle child neglect, local authorities need to be able to show that they are improving neglected children's lives.

'Clearly there is considerable amount of resource being deployed on service delivery. But activity to measure the outcomes of service provision is not commensurate with this investment.'<sup>45</sup> Our research found that although there are some local attempts to show what difference had been made to neglected children's lives, more often than not, this was described more as an aspiration than an attainment.<sup>46</sup>

In 2013, Ofsted introduced the Inspection of Services for Children in Need of Help and Protection, Children Looked After and Care Leavers.<sup>47</sup> It includes welcome references to the expectation that the local authority works with partners to deliver early help and protect children and young people. However, we believe that a local authority should only be able to achieve an outstanding overall rating if it can demonstrate that it has effectively provided early help for neglected children and this has been achieved through joined-up working.

Last year we called on the Government to commission Ofsted to conduct a thematic review of child neglect.<sup>48</sup> Reviews on neglect and early help were commissioned.

At the time of writing these were not published but we hope they will share good practice in tackling child neglect and providing early help.

The Early Intervention Foundation was created in 2013 and set out to champion the use of evidence-based early intervention programmes, practices and systems which improve children and young people's lives. There is potential for the Early Intervention Foundation to review and provide clear guidance on effective, stable, strengths-based services to tackle child neglect. It could also champion innovative approaches designed to address gaps in the system and support these services to achieve a robust evidence base.

### **A Government strategy on neglect must include measures to:**

- ▶ Introduce an early help duty on local authorities to secure the sufficient provision of local early help services for children, young and people and families
- ▶ Identify and promote evidence-based practice to tackle child neglect

# Does national policy and guidance help tackle child neglect?

There have been some recent initiatives that have either directly or indirectly sought to address the issue of child neglect, but these have offered little in terms of practical reforms, and stop far short of a comprehensive Government strategy.

## Munro reforms

The Government commissioned Munro Review (2011<sup>49</sup>) into the child protection system in England offered a number of suggested reforms which if implemented would have an impact on the way child neglect is tackled. Professor Munro recommended a move towards reflective and autonomous practice within social work, and also a rebalancing of the system towards early intervention.

Three years on from the Munro report some changes have been made. For example, a Chief Social Worker has been appointed, the 'consultant social work' model has been implemented by some local authorities. The Government also rewrote the statutory guidance Working Together to Safeguard Children<sup>50</sup> which encouraged more analytical methodologies for Serious Case Reviews and has supported the better writing of Serious Case Reviews.

More recently the Department for Education has announced a pot of 'innovation' funding to assist the local implementation of Munro.

However, many of Munro's suggested reforms have yet to be implemented, or have been undermined by other factors. For example, she recommended that Government introduce an 'early help duty' to ensure that local authorities and statutory partners commission services at a local level. The Government has not introduced such a duty, meanwhile early and preventative services have reduced.<sup>51</sup>

## Spending cuts

The changes put forward in the Munro Review have been undermined by a lack of funding. We know professionals are working in an unstable environment, within restricted, and in some cases still reducing, budgets. This is creating difficult decisions for local areas on how best to invest limited resources.

Our survey data indicates that public spending cuts have been a reality for all the professions we surveyed for the past few years.<sup>52</sup> In 2012, 29 per cent of professionals surveyed felt spending cuts have made it more difficult to intervene in cases of child neglect. This increased significantly to 35 per cent in 2013.

There is a sense among all professional groups surveyed that spending cuts will make it more difficult to intervene in the future. In particular, 65 per cent of social workers say that such cuts have made it more difficult to intervene now. And 73 per cent think public spending cuts will make it more difficult for them to intervene in the future.

## Ofsted

Ofsted recently conducted separate thematic reviews into child neglect and early help. These reviews are welcomed, though at the time of writing the results have yet to be published.

## Scotland and Wales

While there is no national strategy for neglect in Scotland or Wales, there are lessons that can be learnt through different measures that do take a strategic approach.

In Scotland, The Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) framework aims to offer a network of support so that children and young people get the right help at the

right time. The framework has a focus on neglect. GIRFEC incorporates an integrated children's services approach and since its introduction, has supported a positive shift towards early intervention and agencies working together better.

The Children and Young People Bill in Scotland (at the time of writing) proposes that GIRFEC is enshrined in legislation. However, it needs to be adequately resourced to enable provision of support services across the spectrum from earlier intervention to intensive help.<sup>53</sup>

In Wales, we are working with the Welsh Government and NSPCC Cymru/Wales to research the evidence base on child neglect and existing practice. We will deliver recommendations and resources to improve multi-agency response to address child neglect across the spectrum of need. The Welsh Government has introduced a duty upon local authorities to provide a range of preventative services to local populations within the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Bill.<sup>54</sup>

# A national strategy for child neglect

There is no overarching, strategic approach to child neglect in England. We want a national strategy that includes a shift to early help and that creates one, unified system to help neglected children. We need a strategy that covers early help to crisis intervention to reflect the complex nature of child neglect.

To truly embed an early intervention approach, decision-makers need to be given the frameworks and levers that enable this to happen.

## Government must produce a national strategy on child neglect.



Including measures to:

- ▶ Open up the pupil premium so that schools are able to effectively allocate additional resources to help neglected children
- ▶ Ensure that all children's centres have birth data for all children in their local area
- ▶ Ensure that all maternity services and health visitors have up-to-date information about local parenting support services to give to all new parents as part of their child's personal health record
- ▶ Introduce a web-portal for the public to seek help for children they are worried about. It should include a facility to report concerns about a child directly to the relevant council area via a postcode function
- ▶ Run a public awareness campaign on where parents and the public can go to get help about child neglect
- ▶ Update the criminal law on child neglect to include emotional harm, and bring it into line with the definition of neglect under Working Together to Safeguard Children
- ▶ Introduce an early help duty on local authorities to secure the sufficient provision of local early help services for children, young and people and families
- ▶ Update LSCB Regulations 2006 so that LSCBs have a function to collect information on child neglect to inform a local child neglect plan
- ▶ Identify and promote evidence-based practice to tackle child neglect

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# Notes



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Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

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