

Complex (Organised or Multiple) Abuse

1. Definition

Complex (organised or multiple) abuse may be defined as abuse involving one or more abusers and several related or non-related abused children. The abusers concerned may be acting in concert to abuse children, sometimes acting in isolation, or may be using an institutional framework or position of authority to recruit children for abuse.

Such abuse occurs both as part of a network of abuse across a family or community and within institutions such as residential settings, in day care and in other provisions such as youth services, sports clubs and voluntary groups. There may also be cases of children being abused via the use of the internet.

2. Investigation

Each investigation of organised or multiple abuse will be different, according to the characteristics of each situation and the scale and complexity of the investigation. But all will require thorough planning, good inter-agency working and attention to the welfare needs of the child victim or adult survivor involved.

The investigation of complex abuse requires specialist skills from both Police and Children's Social Care Services staff.

Some investigations become extremely complex because of the number of places and people involved, and the timescale over which abuse is alleged to have occurred. In these circumstances a specialist Investigation Management Group (see **Section 7, The Investigation Management Group**), as well as a Strategic Management Group (see **Section 6, The Strategic Management Group**) may be set up.

The complexity is heightened where, as in cases of non-recent (or historical) abuse, the alleged victims are no longer living in the setting where the incidents occurred or where the alleged perpetrators are also no longer linked to the setting or employment role.

These will all need to be taken into consideration when working with a child. The confidentiality of the information relevant to any Section 47 Enquiry and criminal investigation must be strictly maintained by those involved and must not be disclosed to others, including others within the agency, unless necessary.

3. The Child

The single and most important consideration is the safety and well-being of the child or children.

In reconciling the difference between the standard of evidence required for child protection purposes and the standard required for criminal proceedings, emphasis must be given to the protection of the children as the prime consideration.

The investigation and enquiries must also address the racial, religious, cultural, language, sexual orientation, and gender needs of the child, together with any special needs of the child arising from illness or disability.

4. Referral

When receiving information, which may indicate organised or multiple abuse, the recipient should immediately refer the matter to the Police and a manager in Children's Social Care Services.

If there is any suspicion that any managers currently employed by a social care agency are implicated or a member of the Police, the matter should be referred to the Chair of the relevant Safeguarding Children Partnership or in their absence, the Vice-Chair, and a Senior Officer within the Police.

5. The Strategy Meeting

A Strategy Meeting should then be arranged to take place as a matter of urgency to assess the need for future action to be taken under this procedure and whether a criminal investigation should take place.

The Strategy Meeting, chaired by a senior manager from Children's Social Care Services, must take place within 5 working days of the receipt of the referral and be formally recorded. The Manager of the Safeguarding and Reviewing Unit will inform the Safeguarding Children Partnership Chair of the referral.

The nominated senior staff of Children's Social Care Services and the Police should attend the meeting. The meeting will also involve senior staff from Health, Education and other agencies as required and, where necessary, ensure coordination across local authority boundaries.

The Strategy Discussion needs to carefully note and map:

- The children named.
- The children who may be in current contact with possible abusers.
- Children who were, but no longer are, in contact with possible abusers.
- Possible victims who are now adults.
- Witnesses to be interviewed prior to the interviews of children.
- Multiple and simultaneous interviews.

A strategic decision will need to be made by senior managers from the involved agencies as to whether the social work input into the enquiries/investigation can be managed in the conventional way or whether a specialist approach is required for example from a dedicated team outside the service, e.g. the NSPCC.

This will usually depend on the number, geographical spread, and age range of potential interviewees, as well as whether those implicated are foster carers or employees of any member agency.

Where the Strategy Discussion confirms that the investigation will relate to organised or multiple abuse, it will appoint a multi-agency Strategic Management Group (see **Section 6, The Strategic Management Group**) to oversee the process.

Where a member of staff of any agency is implicated in the investigation, their line manager must not be a member of the Strategic Management Group.

6. The Strategic Management Group

The Strategic Management Group will be chaired by a senior officer in Children's Social Care Services and will:

- Complete the mapping process started by the Strategy Discussion as set out in **Section 5, The Strategy Meeting**.
- Specify the terms of reference for the enquiry/investigation.
- Establish ownership of the strategic lead in the investigation.
- Bring together a team of people with the necessary training, expertise, and objectivity to manage and conduct the criminal investigation and/or Section 47 Enquiry on a day-to-day basis. NB: Line managers or colleagues of any person implicated in the investigation must not be involved and the involvement of any person from the workplace under investigation must be considered with particular care.
- Decide whether there is a need for an independent team to investigate the allegations.
- Decide the terms of reference and accountability for the investigating team, including the parameters and timescales of their enquiries/investigation.
- In cases of greater scale and complexity, appoint an Investigation Management Group (IMG) (see **Section 7, The Investigation Management Group**).
- Ensure that appropriate resources are deployed to the investigation including access to legal and other specialist advice, resources, and information.
- Ensure that appropriate resources are available to meet the needs of the children and families or adult survivors, including any specific health issues arising from the abuse.
- Ensure the investigating team are themselves supported with personal counselling if necessary and that issues of staff safety are addressed.
- Ensure that suitable accommodation and administrative support are available for the investigation.
- Liaise as necessary with the Crown Prosecution Service at an early stage before arranging services for a child in need of counselling or therapeutic help so that the help can be given in a way which is consistent with the conduct of the criminal investigation.

- Agree a communications strategy including the handling of political and media issues, and communication as necessary with the Regulatory Authority.
- Ensure that records are kept safely and securely stored and a high level of confidentiality always maintained.
- Hold regular strategic meetings and reviews, which must be recorded, to consider progress, including the effectiveness of the joint working, the need for additional resources and next steps.

7. The Investigation Management Group

In cases of considerable complexity and scale, an Investigation Management Group will be appointed.

Membership of this group should include representatives from Children's Social Care Services, the Police, Health, and the local authorities Legal Services, with other agencies being invited to participate as appropriate.

The tasks and functions of the Group will be subject to the terms of reference agreed by the Strategic Management Group (SMG), and will include the following:

- To provide a forum where professionals can meet, exchange information, and discuss the implementation of the agreed investigation strategy.
- To ensure a consistent strategy for interviewing victims within and outside the council's area.
- To keep the SMG informed of resources and any shortfalls.
- To ensure a consistent and appropriate inter-agency approach to support victims and their families.
- To co-ordinate the inter-agency response to families and provide consistent information.
- To ensure information is shared appropriately with other agencies not represented on the SMG or the IMG.
- To ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities for staff involved in the investigation. Investigators will have full access to all records and key information.
- To ensure that relevant intelligence is passed between agencies and to the Police Major Incident Room (MIR).

6. End of Enquiry/Investigation Meeting and Report

At the conclusion of the enquiry/investigation, the Strategic Management Group will evaluate the investigation, identify the lessons learned and prepare an overview report for the relevant Safeguarding Children Partnership, highlighting any practices, procedures or policies which may need further attention and require either inter-agency or individual agency action plans.