

The Lord Laming CBE DL  
c/o Department for Children, Schools and Families  
Sanctuary Buildings  
Great Smith Street  
London SW1P 3BT

February 10, 2009

Dear Lord Laming,

I am writing following the stakeholder consultation meeting I attended last month to contribute the NSPCC's views on two issues that were discussed at the seminar but not contained in our submission to you in December.

The first issue is how to make real the proposition that 'safeguarding is everyone's responsibility' and specifically the role of citizens and communities in this (as opposed to the role of professionals). The second issue is the emphasis that needs to be given to high-level political leadership within central Government to achieve cultural change in relation to child protection and safeguarding.

**Making real the proposition that safeguarding is everyone's responsibility**

In 1999 the Government expressed its support for the concept that 'safeguarding is everyone's responsibility':

"Responding to child abuse is, and should be, everyone's responsibility: statutory agencies, voluntary organisations, parents and the wider public".

*(PM Tony Blair speaking at the launch of the NSPCC Full Stop campaign).*

This proposition is now part of government policy within the 'staying safe' part of Every Child Matters. Whilst ultimately it will need to be implemented at community level, we consider that central Government can do more to make this happen.

Overcoming barriers to action

There are barriers to be overcome if people are to take responsibility for safeguarding their own and other people's children (Opinion Leader Research for NSPCC, 2003 and 2007). These relate to answering the following questions: 'Have I witnessed abuse?', 'Should I do anything?' and 'If I should do something, do I call a child protection agency?'

Research commissioned by the NSPCC from OLR suggested that adults lack understanding about what constitutes child abuse, how prevalent it is and how to recognise it. They focus their attentions on a narrow range of issues, such as stranger danger and child abduction, and assume that strangers represent the greatest threat to children and young people's safety. When considering whether to take action to safeguard a child, adults focus first on the (negative) consequences for themselves, then on the consequences for the adult/family they are concerned about, and finally on the risk to the child. They fear personal reprisals and are also concerned about making false allegations. Many prefer to do nothing rather than make the wrong move, and rarely think of the consequences of their inaction for the child. Some adults even suggested that reporting their concerns might actually make the situation worse for the child involved.

An important policy change in Every Child Matters is its desired outcome of keeping all children safe, not only the most vulnerable. So it is, rightly, about more than simply encouraging referrals to agencies, it is about people/citizens helping each other. Nevertheless, referral to the police or children's services must be one of the options available to a person concerned about harm to a child.

Our research highlights the public's lack of understanding about the long-term detrimental effects of abuse. Adults may only act when their fear of inaction outweighs their fear of action and may act too late as a result. The research also demonstrated adults' lack of awareness of and trust in agencies/child protection procedures. We expect that this will be all the greater following the tragedy of Baby P, with public confidence in the system in general, and social workers in particular, likely to be at an all-time low.

#### Children often don't tell anyone

In the context of children telling about abuse, NSPCC research (Cawson et al., 2000; Cawson 2002) found that only a quarter of people who had experienced sexual abuse as a child told anyone about it at the time it occurred. A quarter told someone later, but 31 per cent had never told anyone by their early adulthood. A review of the research on children telling about their problems, including abuse, indicated that children and young people's barriers to sharing worries include:

- Feeling there is no-one to talk to (who will listen and can be trusted);
- Feeling they won't be listened to, understood, taken seriously or believed;
- Fear of getting oneself or someone into trouble;
- Fear of lack of control over the information shared and how the information will be acted on by adults, including being made to do something against their will;
- Limited knowledge of formal helping services and what they do;
- The stigma of involvement with formal agencies (Featherstone and Evans, 2004).



Solutions need to address children and young people's expectations of adults, especially professionals, and other routes to children telling about their worries. While it is one option, children rarely self-refer to a professional agency, thus other options need to be fully considered.

This confirmed earlier NSPCC research. 'Voices from Childhood' (Creighton and Russell, 1995) shows that of 168 young adults who said they had been sexually abused, 28 per cent said the abuse stopped by action they initiated, such as confronting their abuser(s) or telling someone older; for 16 per cent the perpetrator stopped the abuse; for six per cent, the abuse had not stopped by the time they were 16. Only four per cent said the abuse had been stopped by going to the police or social services.

Other reasons given for the abuse stopping were avoiding the abuser (19%) leaving home (5%). Solutions need to include equipping people to help themselves and to help others, not only 'reporting' to agencies. Similarly, the NSPCC prevalence study (Cawson et al, 2000) found that of the quarter of the young adults who told someone that they had been sexually abused at the time it occurred, 55 per cent told a friend, 29 per cent their mother/step-mother and 11 per cent had told their father. Thirteen per cent told a sibling, two per cent a social worker, 7seven per cent the police, five per cent a teacher and one per cent a helpline.

We think that a number of steps can be taken to make a reality of safeguarding being everyone's responsibility.

## **1. Government-led communications campaign**

We recommend that a Government-led communications plan moving the public – all of us – from awareness, to responsibility, to action, would assist members of the public to feel that they are properly equipped to respond appropriately to concerns they may have about a child. The integration of public education advertising, targeted public relations, internet-based communication and distribution of printed material has proved an effective approach to changing attitudes and behaviour among both adults and children.

The challenge is how to square this with the immediate need to restore confidence in public services and social workers.

## **2. Informing the public about the nature and scale of abuse and what they can do**

This could be done centrally or locally - by either LSCBs or MAPPAs, or both. A central template for an information product of this order could easily be developed for local use.



### **3. Providing routes for people to check their concerns, short of reporting abuse**

We are pleased that there is now recognition that telephone helplines can provide a route for expressions of concern. This mechanism allows the caller some degree of control over what happens next. We are giving further consideration to the targeting of NSPCC helplines for adults. In particular, consideration is being given to target potentially protective parents, parents of children who are too young, or unable, to call ChildLine, and people working with children who are unsure how they can best protect a child.

We are pleased that Government has recognised the role of helplines, and is currently contributing £30 million over four years to the cost of funding helpline services for children (ChildLine) and adults worried about the safety of a child (the NSPCC Helpline). This funding is only guaranteed to March 2011; we would like to see a commitment beyond this date.

### **4. Recognising the role of non-specialist organisations in safeguarding children and helping them to make this visible**

We welcome the opportunity to establish and run the National Safeguarding Unit for the Third Sector in partnership with Children England. This builds on our experience of the Safe Communities project, which has demonstrated the enormous reach that can be achieved with the investment of relatively small resources. We have distributed nearly 5,000 community toolkits to a very wide range of community and voluntary groups, which involve close to one million children in their activities. The toolkits contain a range of materials to help organisations understand their responsibilities and put safeguards in place to protect children. The project has had a significant impact in raising the awareness of safeguarding among staff and volunteers and in creating safer environments for children and young people.

NSPCC Consultancy Services work with a wide range of organisations across the statutory, voluntary and commercial sectors to help them improve their safeguarding policies and procedures and organisational systems and structures to make children safe. We would like to see the Government strengthen the role of LSCBs in ensuring that all organisations involved with children, including the private sector, have such safeguards in place.

There remains a challenge for LSCBs to engage with the voluntary and community sector in meaningful ways, beyond simple representation on the Board. Voluntary sector representation on LSCBs is too often limited to the large charities. The Safe Communities project was in part a response to your own observation that community groups are the eyes and ears of the most vulnerable and hard-to-reach children. Continued engagement of the sector needs to remain a strand of



government policy - both national and regional - within and beyond the activities of the National Safeguarding Unit.

The government should work from an understanding that safeguarding is as much a responsibility for commissioners of services as for their providers, and ensure that this understanding is reflected in its tenders and grant programmes

### **Government leadership and commitment to protecting children at risk of significant harm**

As we emphasised in our evidence to you, it is essential that the government shows leadership on behalf of those children most at risk. This involves helping the public to retain a focus on intra-familial abuse and abuse by a person known to the child, as well as strangers and users of the internet.

An element of this is to ensure that the join is made between the crime route to safeguarding and the care route, between the DCSF, DH, the Home Office and other Government Departments, and that this is reflected at a local level. Whilst the early identification of physical abuse and neglect can readily be appreciated as a key challenge for the care route, it is less clear how sexual abuse might be prevented and how early intervention in sexual abuse can take place. How the care and crime routes can enable early intervention in sexual abuse is thus a key challenge for the next few years. Since submitting our evidence to you we have published data obtained from police forces using the Freedom of Information Act which demonstrate the young age of victims of sexual abuse, the scale of this challenge, and the need to rise to it. We would be happy to share this data with you if this would be helpful.

We also stated in our evidence our concern that within the broad sweep of Every Child Matters insufficient attention has been paid in the past few years to child protection. Cultural change is needed not only in relation the big picture and making safeguarding everyone's responsibility. It is also needed in relation to the moral imperative that we all share to protect effectively the most vulnerable children. If public confidence is to be restored in public services and in social workers, it is necessary to ensure that the protection of the vulnerable is as right as it can be. And professionals, their managers and local leadership must be in no doubt about central government's determination and leadership on this, especially after the media noise on Baby P has died down. There is an urgency about this. We commend and endorse Rob Hutchinson's letter to you, particularly in its description of the need for government to improve the pace of change.

Whilst we welcome the fact that accountability goes all the way from the frontline worker up to the Secretary of State, and the fact that for the first time there is a Cabinet post and a Department with specific responsibility for children, we do not think that child protection has the high-level political priority and leadership it deserves within central Government. This compares starkly with Government



responses in other areas, notably internet safety and sex offender management. Given the extraordinary strength and nature of public concern about these issues it is important for central Government actively to demonstrate such political leadership by creating a structure within Government to do this.

I would be very happy to discuss these matters further with you or someone from your team.

Yours sincerely,

Diana Sutton  
**Head of Policy and Public Affairs**

(Tel: 020 7825 2854; email: [dianasutton@nspcc.org.uk](mailto:dianasutton@nspcc.org.uk))

