

**Establishing common European numbers for child helplines:  
Comments from the NSPCC**

**October 2006**

**Introduction**

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children ([NSPCC](http://www.nspcc.org.uk)) is the UK's leading non-governmental organisation specialising in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children. We have over 180 teams and projects whose work includes family support, assessment, counselling and therapy to children and families experiencing abuse; investigations into allegations of child abuse; and work within schools and other youth organisations to provide a voice for children and advocate their rights. We seek to influence legislation, policy, practice, attitudes and behaviours for the benefit of children and young people.

The NSPCC provides two helplines:

1. **ChildLine**, a free helpline for children and young people in the UK to call to speak to a counsellor about any problem ([www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk));
2. The **Child Protection Helpline**, a free line for anyone (adults or children) to call if they are worried about a child's safety or welfare, or need help or advice ([www.nspcc.org.uk/nspcc/helpline](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/nspcc/helpline))

The NSPCC also runs an **online information and advice service** for young people aged 12 - 16 ([www.There4me.com](http://www.There4me.com)). Its target audience is the two thirds of young people who have been abused but do not take advantage of current services to speak about their abuse.

The NSPCC is a member of Child Helpline International (CHI) and participates in the CHI group drafting minimum standards for Helplines. We have been involved in several Commission-funded projects aiming to define a minimum quality standard system for helpline operators. ChildLine was part of a Commission-funded project in 2001 which developed '*Guidelines for Good Practice for European telephone helplines for children and young people*'<sup>1</sup>.

On the basis of our expertise, we comment in this paper on the proposed **European common numbers for child helplines and for hotlines for missing and sexually exploited children**. These comments are made in a spirit of constructive contribution to help further the process, with the goal of achieving our common aim of providing better protection and support for children throughout the EU.

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<sup>1</sup> Funded by the Daphne Programme.

## **NSPCC: ChildLine and Child Protection Helpline**

### **a) ChildLine**

ChildLine is the UK's free, 24-hour helpline for children in distress or danger. Trained volunteer counsellors comfort, advise and protect children and young people who may feel they have nowhere else to turn.

Almost 1,400 volunteers provide a counselling service, supervised by a team of professional supervisors and managers, out of 11 counselling centres across the UK. Every day around 4,500 children call ChildLine, but lack of funds means that only 2,500 of them will get through to our counsellors for comfort, advice and protection.

#### What do children call about?

Children call ChildLine about a wide range of problems, but the most common problems are sexual and physical abuse/exploitation, bullying, serious family tensions, worries about friends' welfare and teenage pregnancy<sup>2</sup>.

#### How does ChildLine help?

Since it was launched in 1986, ChildLine has saved children's lives, found refuges for children in danger on the streets, and given hope to thousands of children who believed no one else cared for them. ChildLine has now counselled well over one million children and young people. ChildLine campaigns on behalf of children by relaying what they tell us to policy-makers who can help change children's lives for the better. ChildLine also provides an outreach service to schools and youth groups.

### **b) Child Protection Helpline**

The NSPCC Child Protection Helpline is a 24-hour service which covers England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The majority of calls are from adults concerned about the welfare of a child, with a smaller proportion coming from children themselves. About 13% of calls received relate to children at serious risk of harm, and these result in referrals to the appropriate child protection agencies for further investigation.

The Helpline receives a wide range of general requests for information, advice and counselling. Common issues include children's behavioural difficulties, contact and residence problems, child protection proceedings, and adults who have been abused as children. We help callers by identifying what actions they can take to deal with problems they might be experiencing, as well as by providing information about local advice and support groups.

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<sup>2</sup> Click here for further reading about the types of calls received by ChildLine, issue by issue, in the ChildLine 'Casenotes' series: <http://www.childline.org.uk/Casenotes.asp>

The Helpline does not provide a confidential service, but provides a service to those who wish to remain anonymous.

#### Our relationship with other child protection agencies

The NSPCC Helpline works in close co-operation with Social Services and the Police, making an average of 20 referrals a week. Where investigation might be required, or is ongoing, we provide as thorough information as possible about the child's background, needs and possible risks. Many people are often fearful or suspicious of involvement with the statutory agencies, but because we are an independent service we are viewed by the public as a 'safer' and more approachable agency with whom to discuss their concerns. Often our role is to bridge the gap between some of the most vulnerable members of society and the agencies providing the help which they need.

We also work with other agencies and NSPCC Teams in establishing Special Help lines to back up complex joint investigations or to promote preventative initiatives. Regular contact is maintained with other help lines and children's charities so that our services can be co-ordinated and improved through sharing of experience.

#### Professional Counselling

All counsellors at the Helpline are fully trained social workers, counsellors, teachers or nurses with child protection and counselling experience. They have working familiarity with all aspects of child protection procedures, legal issues and responding to child protection concerns.

#### Culturally Relevant Service/ Providing a Service for Deaf People

The Helpline is the public face of the NSPCC and as such is working towards providing a service that is culturally relevant and sensitive to callers from the broad range of groups in our society. All our calls are monitored for ethnic origin in order that we can effectively tailor service to the needs of children and callers from many different backgrounds. We have developed an Asian Languages Child Protection Helpline which was launched in November 2001, and our Welsh Helpline provides culturally sensitive and language support to the Welsh community.

The Helpline supports hearing impaired callers by providing a text phone service (also 24 hours), which enables them to communicate with a counsellor.

#### Commissioned Services

Another aspect of our work is providing Commissioned Helpline services to other agencies, including to police and social services when they are undertaking major enquiries. We may also provide these to other voluntary organisations to support adults concerned about children in specific settings.

## NSPCC Comments and Issues for Discussion

### Background

The idea of a common European number for child helplines has been in discussion for some few years. It was supported by a European Parliament Written Declaration adopted in December 2005 which recommended that EU child helplines should have a common toll-free telephone number. The NSPCC supported this Written Declaration<sup>3</sup>.

On 4th July 2006 the European Commission announced its intention “*to attribute one single six digit telephone number (116xyz) within the EU for child helplines and one for child hotlines dedicated to missing and sexually exploited children*”, within a Communication setting out steps towards a European strategy on children’s rights.

The first allocation of numbers in the 116 series may be made in the first half of 2007 with the approval of the COCOM Committee (made up of representatives of Member State governments), depending on applications to reserve specific numbers.

The allocation of a number would not create an in-use system; rather it would only mean that a given reserved number (116xxx) could be allocated by a national regulatory authority<sup>4</sup> to a relevant helpline in its Member State. If a person called this number, they would be routed to the helpline which was connected to that number within the Member State from which they called. (For example, if ChildLine UK had requested to be connected to 116xxx in the UK, and this was approved, then any caller dialling 116xxx in the UK would be routed to ChildLine UK, as if they had called 0800 1111).

This would simply create a means for the same phone number to be used for the same purpose in participating Member States, should the necessary steps be taken by the actors involved to use such a possibility.

Realising a common European number for child helplines would therefore mean moving a number of steps beyond what is currently proposed. For example, the NSPCC believes that a common number would only create added value if it could be called from any country in Europe (currently it would only be active in a country if a helpline in that country successfully applied to their national authority for the number), if children all over Europe knew about it (who would publicise this number in each country?) and if it could deal with language issues

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<sup>3</sup> The Written Declaration also recommended that “the European Union support child helplines as an essential part of the child protection system and that this be recognised by the Commission and the governments of Member States”, and “the European Union support Child Helpline International (of which NSPCC is a member) as a platform for EU child helplines to network and liaise on regional issues and that CHI be provided with assistance for this”.

<sup>4</sup> In the UK the national regulatory authority is OFCOM

(could ChildLine UK help a child who spoke only Slovenian?). These and other crucial questions, including what the added value would be for children, have not yet been explored.

### **General Comments**

The NSPCC strongly supports cooperation in Europe (and beyond) between child helplines. We believe such cooperation can greatly contribute to the protection of children in Europe, for example through sharing expertise and developing common standards.

We also welcome the European Commission's recognition of the importance of helplines as core elements of child protection systems. The NSPCC sees clear opportunities to build on existing cooperation between helplines to further develop services for the benefit of children. The NSPCC believes that governments have a key role to play in supporting child helplines to fulfil their vital missions<sup>5</sup>.

Common European numbers for child helplines could, if organised through well designed, managed and regulated systems, provide a useful contribution to improving the protection and support afforded to certain groups of children in the EU. However the idea needs further exploration, and should be viewed within a broader process of improving child protection via helplines, for example with further development of common standards and procedures for child helplines.

The primary aim of all work in this area must be to provide the best possible service to children, and ensure the highest attainable level of protection for children in Europe.

The nature of child helplines differs from that of many other types of lines which may be linked in a common European number system (such as to block credit cards). Callers are often vulnerable and distressed. The kind of information dealt with and the issues discussed, are often extremely sensitive and personal and can even be a matter of life and death. Children may have thought hard before deciding to share something with a helpline counsellor, and failure to respond to their needs can lead to the phone being put down. In addition, the links helplines have with authorities dealing with child protection such as policy and social services are crucial. The way any common European number is managed and regulated is thus of particular importance.

Setting up functioning, useful and relevant common number systems for child helplines and other lines aiming to protect children would be a complex project, especially as it concerns the sensitive area of child protection. Time and thought need to be given to how this would bring

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<sup>5</sup> The NSPCC is currently calling on the UK Government to fund advice and support services providing vital help to children: telephone (helpline), text and online support services. Currently, not every child's request for help can be answered because of the limited national availability of funding for advice and support services. For example 43 per cent of all calls to NSPCC ChildLine go unanswered. Click here for more information: <http://campaigning.nspcc.org.uk/cms/cmsloader?CxiXFA&view=12,281,941,0,-html>

benefits to children, and how and by whom this could best be developed. All relevant stakeholders – including children themselves – should be involved in this process.

The NSPCC recommends that a first step should be a feasibility study, involving relevant stakeholders including children. Such a study should assess how advice and support services offered to children in Europe can be further developed and strengthened, including through using the possibility now being offered to develop a common European number for child helplines.

Finally, the NSPCC notes that there is no clear distinction between helplines and hotlines (as is made by the Commission), and believes that it is not practical to try to demarcate particular types of problems affecting children (such as ‘missing and sexually exploited children’) from others. The NSPCC recommends that this is given further consideration as part of the study.

### **Practical issues to be explored**

To assist this process of reflection and help identify some of the issues which would need to be covered in a feasibility study, we would like to highlight some of the practical issues which need to be considered, and make suggestions regarding the process.

#### **1. Who would benefit from a common European number for child helplines? Who are the target users for the helpline numbers?**

Before setting up any system based on the new common number mechanism, it is crucial to consider why we should do it and who would benefit. Assuming that helplines which are part of a common system will keep their own numbers and identity at national level<sup>6</sup>, the groups expected to take advantage of the existence of a common European number may be relatively small. A feasibility study should help determine what may be a likely number of callers, and from which groups (eg trafficked children, people living or holidaying in other European countries, runaway children and young people..). An understanding of who may use the number(s) would also be crucial to be able to respond accurately to users’ needs.

#### **2. What do children think about the idea of a common European number?**

It is important to ensure that children are consulted about all decisions which affect them, in accordance with article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. To our knowledge, children have not yet been consulted about the proposal. It is also crucial that children should be consulted about any choice of number which they would then be invited to use, in line with best practice in this area, to ensure it would be as accessible as possible for children.

#### **3. How would helplines manage cooperation around a common number?**

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<sup>6</sup> The NSPCC would be against any move to replace national numbers

The NSPCC believes that a common number would only add value to existing services, and indeed be possible at all, if it was rooted in close cooperation between involved helplines. Helplines using the same number in different countries would be automatically linked by association with the same number, which could cause problems if close cooperation (eg around minimum standards) had not first been developed – poor practice in one country could lead to reduced public confidence across the European helplines, for example. An initial feasibility study may suggest that linking up of helplines through a common number would only be possible after further agreement on minimum standards, which would need to be undertaken as a first phase of work. This issue is explored in more depth below.

#### **4. The product: the need for common minimum standards for helplines**

Standards in helplines (generally referred to as principles, standards and procedures<sup>7</sup> or ‘PSPs’) are crucial. This includes issues such as:

- the level of confidentiality with which the information will be treated. In the case of the NSPCC, ChildLine has a policy of confidentiality, and ChildLine counsellors will not pass on any information about a caller to anyone else and all conversations are private. ChildLine will only break confidentiality if the young person or someone else they talk about is in a life-threatening situation. The Child Protection Helpline can be anonymous, and full information is provided about what will be done with any information provided by a caller.<sup>8</sup>
- the level of training of people answering the phones. Are they trained counsellors? Do they have a good understanding of police and social service structures, and child protection systems? In the case of NSPCC, for example, all counsellors at the Child Protection Helpline are fully trained social workers with child protection and counselling experience. Counsellors at ChildLine are mainly volunteers who receive comprehensive training and are managed by a team of professional supervisors.
- times of operation. ChildLine operates 24 hours, 7 days a week, but many European helplines are small and do not have the capacity to be open permanently.
- the language policy. This is a particular issue in the case of a common number which could be called from anywhere in Europe, including by children who may come from non-EU countries (eg in the case of trafficked children).

Across European helplines, these kind of standards vary widely. Currently there are no agreed common minimum standards which helplines across Europe adhere to. This has a number of implications, including:

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<sup>7</sup> Principles, standards and procedures (PSPs) cover for example information provided to users, procedures on recording of information, the role of managers, ways of working with other child protection agencies etc. NSPCC PSPs for Helpline services can be found at: [http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/Publications/Downloads/ELECTIVE9Helplines\\_pdf\\_gf25282.pdf](http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/Publications/Downloads/ELECTIVE9Helplines_pdf_gf25282.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> The NSPCC’s Child Protection Helpline publishes all this information on its website, click here for details: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/nspcc/helpline?action=showhelplinecontent17&view=hlfaq#Confidentiality>

- The UK experience shows that it is important that users are able to access clear information about what kind of service they can expect when they dial a particular number. Users of a common number would currently find it difficult, if not impossible, to access this information.
- Users would not receive the same service depending on which national helpline they were re-routed to.
- As noted above, poor practice in one country could lead to reduced public confidence across the European helplines.

This question of standards is therefore a particularly important one, not only in relation to setting up a common system, but also to support the development of all helplines in Europe more broadly. For the majority of children the first point of call would be a national helpline number, not a common European number. We believe focusing on standards is also a practical way of ensuring every child living in the EU has access to a high quality helpline.

#### **5. Who would regulate helplines based on common standards?**

Which authority would ensure minimum quality standard maintenance, review and standardisation? This would need to be established.

#### **6. How many and which distinct common numbers are necessary?**

The NSPCC believes that there should be one common number for child helplines, rather than two lines as proposed by the Commission (with one being for ‘hotlines’). We are concerned that creating two numbers would be confusing for users and does not reflect how such telephone lines are used.

For example, it is not clear to us how it would be decided which lines would be linked to which number, especially as numbers are generally not dedicated specifically to ‘missing and sexually exploited children’ but have a much wider – or narrower – remit. Potential callers who may not know whether the issue they wish to call about would fall into these categories, or what type of national helpline they would be redirected to.

Furthermore calls about these issues are not always emergency calls, so the way the calls would be dealt with would differ. It is also not clear why it would be limited to sexual exploitation - trafficked children for example often suffer other forms of exploitation than sexual abuse – and we believe it is not useful to link only issues of sexual exploitation and missing children in this way.

#### **7. How would a common number system be organised?**

As described above, creating a mechanism to enable allocation of the same number for the same purpose in different Member States would not in itself establish an in-use common number system. A detailed consideration of how this mechanism can best be taken advantage of to put in place a system of benefit to children is vital. National helplines cannot take

significant decisions about their participation in any common number system until it is clear what would be the implications of being part of this.

#### **8. How would common numbers be allocated and managed in countries where multiple helplines exist?**

In some countries, there is just one helpline which could in principle be linked in to both a child helplines system and a child protection helplines system. However in others, such as the UK, there are a number of different helplines for children and adults. How would it be determined which of these should be linked into which number? How would this be managed in the best interests of children? If all of them were linked in, who would take the decision in a possible central call centre to which of the helplines a call should be re-routed?

A 'first-come-first-served' approach would not be acceptable as this could not be in interests of children. Questions around which helplines should be part of which system (there is no obvious answer to this question) could for example be dealt with by agreeing clear criteria for helplines to become part of the joined-up system. This is vital to avoid any arbitrary selection of helplines, which is especially important in countries like the UK where there are various different helplines fulfilling different functions, and to guarantee the best possible service to users.

The process being discussed and agreed by the Commission and the COCOM Committee<sup>9</sup> for allocating numbers to particular organisations (which would be applied to all 116 series numbers) should be analysed in relation to child helplines. Would this process guarantee the optimum result in the case of these helplines? The mechanism itself can be important for determining the outcome.

It is also important to recognise that being linked in to the common number, or not being linked, could have significant financial implications for helplines, where helpline fundraising capacity is based on the volume of calls received.

#### **9. How would the helpline numbers be publicised and how would confusion with localised numbers be avoided?**

If the common numbers were to be effective, it would be crucial for relevant groups to be properly informed about them. Who would publicise the numbers and how? For example, would national helplines be expected to publicise the European number(s)? Alternatively, would governments undertake to publicise the common numbers?

Publicising a second number could lead to significant confusion for the public, and conflict with ongoing marketing and public awareness of existing numbers, which would be problematic.

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<sup>9</sup> The Communications Committee, which is made up of national civil servants and coordinated by DG Information Society of the European Commission.

Helplines may therefore be unwilling to publicise a common European number. There would also be considerable financial implications.

#### **10. How would re-routing between different helplines be managed?**

Setting up a common number system may mean going beyond simply common standards for national helplines, and enabling re-routing of calls between participating helplines, perhaps directly, or through a central call centre. This would be very complex to manage.

- Where would a call from a child or an adult be initially received? If a call was initially directed to a central 'call centre' what standards would this central point adhere to?
- Who would manage and regulate a central call centre and how would this be agreed?
- What apparatus would be used for central call management and what criteria would be used to transfer to Helplines? For example would transfer criteria be based on the problem presented by the caller, or the geographical location?
- Initial contacts from callers often focus on an issue which disguises an underlying, more serious issue. How would calls be effectively triaged (analysed and dealt with appropriately) at initial contact?
- How would data analysis and effectiveness management be carried out?
- How would coordination with public authorities (eg police and social services) around child protection concerns be dealt with in cases where more than one country was involved?

#### **11. What would be the implications for development of e-services?**

It is our experience that children and young people are increasingly using different ways of looking for help, with which they are often more comfortable and have better access to, such as SMS, e-mail and instant messaging. While this varies across countries there are clear common trends, and this must also be considered as part of a forward-looking approach.

#### **12. What is the best process for ensuring that these questions are adequately answered?**

For the NSPCC it is vital that a timetable and process for work on the common European numbers is established which allows the necessary time and means to bring together all the key stakeholders to work through the issues laid out above, based on principles of transparency and participation. Such an important matter should not be rushed through, as this risks failing to ensure a credible and legitimate way forward.

Any common European numbers for helplines will affect all existing helplines in the EU, and all should have the opportunity to be involved and contribute their experience and expertise within a feasibility study.

In the immediate future, this means that numbers could be 'reserved' for child helplines (to avoid suitable numbers being allocated for other purposes), however further steps should only be planned on the basis of a comprehensive study.

The NSPCC recommends that CHI take forward work on a feasibility study as soon as possible, as agreed at the October 2006 international consultation (Europe Region). Although financial support from the Commission would be useful, the priority at this point is to move forward with a study without waiting for such support which may not be available until some time in 2007, if at all.

Summary of NSPCC Recommendations:

- A detailed feasibility study on the idea of creating common European numbers for child helplines (including consideration of the proposed hotline for missing and sexually exploited children). This should include broader considerations around how to build on the existing contribution of child helplines to protecting children in Europe.
- All relevant stakeholders, including helplines across Europe and children themselves, should be consulted as part of the study
- While a 116 number for child helplines could be reserved now, decisions around if, how and by whom the numbers will be used should be postponed until the results of the study are known.

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