

Investigating institutional abuse of children: an exploration of the NSPCC experience

Summary of research and findings

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Methodology

The research criteria for inclusion in the study was any NSPCC teams who had undertaken an independent investigation into abuse within a residential or day care setting between 1994 and 1996. Overall 16 projects were identified, and a total of 41 semi structured interviews undertaken with NSPCC employees. The majority (26) were with practitioners, 12 were with team leaders and 3 with managers above project leader level. In addition, 36 independent investigation reports undertaken in the two year period were analysed.

Background information: findings from the investigation reports

- Thirty-six independent investigations concerned 76 allegations of abuse made by 67 children and young people against 50 alleged abusers (40 adults and 10 residents).
- The highest number of children involved in any one investigation was 15, however the great majority (25) involved only a single child.
- Two-thirds of investigations related to recent abuse, 8 concerned past abuse, and 4 involved both.
- The majority of children involved were adolescents, with an equal number of boys and girls.
- Nearly all of the allegations concerned abuse within residential children's homes.
- Nearly all the alleged perpetrators were male.
- The majority of allegations related to physical abuse (33), followed by sexual abuse (24), inappropriate restraint (16) and a minority concerned inappropriate

care.

- Just over half (41) of allegations were upheld, a third (26) were deemed inconclusive and 9 allegations were found to be false.

Evaluation of the investigation process

- **Strategy meeting**

Nearly every person interviewed (38) stated that at the beginning of the investigation a strategy meeting had been convened which they, or another representative of the NSPCC had attended. The importance of such meetings, especially the preliminary one, to the smooth running of the investigation, was emphasised by nearly all these respondents (36). Although in principle this meeting is supposed to aid multi-agency working, in practice many respondents (28) had found it to be a highly politicised process where the agenda had often been pre-determined by the local authority representatives. Some (19) reported feeling intimidated by their lack of status within these meetings due to the seniority of the local authority representatives present.

- **Remit and scope of the investigation**

The remit and scope of the investigation was a central concern of many respondents, mostly this focused on how encompassing the scope of the investigation should be. A minority (9) felt that it should be strictly limited to the child protection instance that had been alleged. However, the majority of respondents (26) who expressed a view felt that the remit should not simply focus on the specific incident, but needed to have a significantly more extensive scope enabling the wider dynamics of the establishment, including the role of management, to be evaluated.

In practice many (24) identified that the remit they had worked with in the past had been too restrictive, with the majority of respondents reporting that they would have preferred to have a broader remit, which included a mandate to interview all staff, including management, and any children whom they felt would be appropriate.

- **Suspension**

About half (21) of the alleged adult abusers had been suspended during the investigations. In the majority of these cases (15) staff members had been suspended prior to the initial strategy meeting. Workers were most likely to be suspended in cases of alleged sexual abuse. However NSPCC investigators frequently stated that suspension was sometimes viewed by both the suspended staff member and other members of the residential staff team as a verdict of guilt without a trial. Some investigators (15) felt that this actually made the staff view them with suspicion and affected their willingness to co-operate with the

investigation.

- **Multi-agency working**

In only two investigations the social service department, the police service and the NSPCC each provided a number of workers to undertake a multi-agency inquiry. Both of these investigations concerned widespread sexual abuse allegations, covering a number of years. Although a further 19 investigations did have some level of police presence, their participation was minor and quickly fell away at the initial stages when no criminal prosecution was thought likely to occur. In 8 investigations, NSPCC practitioners worked alongside colleagues from social services departments, generally child protection officers. In 12 investigations two or more NSPCC practitioners worked on the inquiry, and in 14 cases a single NSPCC practitioner undertook the investigation.

The nature of independence

- **Evaluation of the NSPCC's independent status**

The majority of respondents (34) voiced some doubts about how independent they were from the commissioning local authority. All respondents felt they were able to bring higher levels of independence than if the local authority concerned used its own child protection workers to undertake the investigation. However, respondents frequently (19) felt that projects' service level agreements with commissioning local authorities sat uncomfortably alongside notions of independence. Just over half (22) felt that local authorities placed pressure on them to accept an investigation, and many (26) reported feeling that refusing a request would have repercussions regarding their wider working relationships with the authority concerned. Respondents (21) also reported feeling worried they might jeopardize their projects' relationship with the local authority if they "*rocked the boat too much*" within the investigation. Some respondents (9) stated that their projects had developed positive relationships with the local authorities, where each respective body had clear expectations about each other's role, and the level of autonomy NSPCC investigators required. However most reported this had taken a considerable amount of time to develop.

- **Investigating colleagues**

The research found that the most commonly stated problem (28) concerned investigating professionals within the team's own geographical area. This was additionally compounded in many cases by investigating professionals who were working in a field related to their own. Respondents were particularly uncomfortable with investigating professionals whom they knew through their general work.

- **Previous knowledge about a facility**

About a third of respondents (13) felt that having previous contact with a residential establishment, even if this did not include direct contact with the

alleged abuser(s), might affect their ability to view the situation objectively. Primarily, respondents expressed concern about bringing prior knowledge, and preconceptions about a facility into the investigation, and the effect this may have on their ability to be impartial and objective.

- **Effect on wider working practices**
About two-thirds of respondents (24) were worried that undertaking these investigations might affect their wider relationship with colleagues. It was feared that workers who had been investigated might discuss this with colleagues outside their facilities, which could affect the team's relationships with other professionals. Some respondents (8) discussed difficulties in resuming a working relationship with colleagues they had investigated, irrespective of the verdict.
- **Investigating peers outside local areas**
Teams that investigated agencies outside their immediate areas stated that this had made their role as investigators significantly easier, more impartial and less stressful for themselves and the workers they were investigating.

Evidence

Most investigations lacked physical corroborative evidence. In only 14 cases did the abuse result in a recorded physical injury. There was therefore a reliance upon witness statements and the accounts of the child and the alleged abuser. In recognition of this, respondents felt that the interviewing techniques used in independent investigations were not only extremely important but also significantly different to family investigations. The major differences revolved around the '*detective style*' interviewing required when investigating out-of-home abuse compared to the more '*assisting*' interviews undertaken in cases of suspected intra-familial abuse.

Issues of support

Many (32) felt that the young people who had alleged the abuse incident(s) were not properly supported throughout the investigatory process. In a minority of investigations (6) the child had been formally supported by a social worker or the local authority's children's rights officer, however these cases generally seemed to be the exception. Most (34) respondents felt that these would be the most appropriate link person to provide this service to the complainant.

- **Supporting the alleged abuser**
Although most respondents placed priority upon providing support for the younger person concerned, many (27) also felt that the alleged abusers were often simply abandoned, with no support being offered from the local authority. The research showed that only rarely (8) did the local authority appoint a formal link person for the alleged abuser. Even in instances where such support was received,

it was limited, and often seemed to simply disappear as the investigation proceeded.

- **Supporting other children**

The research also showed that many respondents (18) felt that the young people within the homes were not being properly supported through the process. Allegations of abuse may be particularly difficult for vulnerable children to deal with, especially if it raises issues relating to their past abuse.

- **Supporting the staff group**

Respondents (23) felt that facilities were often forgotten, being offered very little, if any, support from their immediate line managers. In addition advice or guidance was rarely offered informing staff of their responsibility to support the alleged victim and other children within the home.

Post-substantiation issues

Most respondents (31) felt that a central feature of an investigation was to determine and highlight which policies, procedures and working practices may have contributed to the abuse occurring. Leading on from this, some respondents (26) felt that the report should not simply identify the present policy and practice issues, but ought to contain specific recommendations as to how these could be changed to ensure that the abuse would not occur again for similar reasons.

However, many respondents (33) stated that the post-substantiation phase of the investigation was "*unsatisfactory*", "*highly frustrating*" or "*inadequate*". Most felt that in comparison to investigating intra-familial abuse there existed a lack of post-substantiation procedures.

Development issues

Respondents had generally not received any specialised training regarding investigating out-of-home abuse. The majority of workers felt that the skills they had acquired in relation to family abuse were relevant to investigating institutional abuse allegations. Nevertheless, many respondents stated that they would welcome additional training. Training requirements centred upon the differences between intra-familial abuse and institutional abuse, residential policies and procedures, informal institutional processes, restraint techniques and interviewing adolescents with emotional and/or behavioural difficulties.

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