

Schools, Social Services and Safeguarding Children: Past practice and future challenges

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1 Background

The role of schools in child protection has been examined in the literature for the past thirty years. Much of this work has come from the USA and has focused on the views of teachers and social workers. While this has been helpful in developing work in this country, the two jurisdictions are so different that robust studies based on the UK experience have been long overdue. This research was intended to add both to the understanding of how teachers and social workers worked together to protect children and how decisions taken by professionals impinged on subsequent inter-agency and cross-professional contacts. It was also designed to focus on the reality of schools' involvement in the child protection process, which up until this point has been based more on speculation and deduction than empirical investigation.

When this study was initiated in 2000, the intention was to add to the understanding of how schools participate in the child protection process. Despite the fact that schools were expected to play a significant role within a multi-agency approach and while there was a body of research from the USA, up until then few research studies involving teachers and schools had been conducted in this area in the UK. In some ways this study was overtaken by events as schools have assumed a more central role in policies and various initiatives designed to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. In response to Lord Laming's Inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié policy and legislative changes were introduced which shape the immediate future of children's services. The Children Act 2004 forms the basis of a long-term programme of change and *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (DfES, 2004a) provides the national framework for achieving improved outcomes for children, young people and families. One of the key changes has been the integration of education and children's social services into children's service departments, and the bringing together of all services for children and young people into the strategic partnerships of Children's Trusts.

This research project was stimulated, in part, by the responses to a survey conducted in the late 1990s (Baginsky, 2000). The survey showed that, the majority of designated teachers for child protection (hereafter referred to as designated teachers) were confident that they would be able to recognise the indicators of abuse and act appropriately. However, they expressed a number of concerns, which included the extent to which all teachers understood their responsibilities and how best to improve communications between schools and social services departments.

The findings from this study reflect how schools were involved with the child protection process prior to these changes. As such this study will contribute to an understanding of how schools are positioned to assume their reshaped role within the new framework and, in turn, to identify the support they need to do this effectively.

The emerging role of education in the child protection process

The twentieth century saw increasing awareness of child abuse and an increased role for government in developing relevant policies. Over the past 40 years there has been a more concerted attempt to develop systematic strategies and programmes designed to help address the problem. However, the fact that new legislation in the form of the Children Act 2004 has been deemed necessary implies a failure of the measures which preceded it. The Act was also an attempt to address what was seen as the inability of agencies to collaborate effectively. The emphasis on agencies working together to protect children has been evident in reports dating back over 60 years. The 1945 inquiry into the death of 13-year-old Dennis O'Neill, who was beaten to death by his foster father, identified poor communication between the staff and agencies responsible for his care. In the 1960s the importance of inter-agency collaboration was officially recognised in a number of reports. These included those from the Central Advisory Council for Education Report in 1967 (Central Advisory Council for Education: Plowden Report, 1967) and the Committee on Local Authority and Allied Personal Social Services Report in 1968 (Committee on Local Authority and Allied Personal Social Services: Seebohm Report, 1968). However, the inquiry into the death of Maria Colwell (Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS, 1974a) was the real watershed. The inquiry's report identified the greatest failure

as being the lack effective communication and liaison between the agencies involved: information was not being passed on and there was no proper co-ordination. One result was a Memorandum on Non-Accidental Injury to Children (DHSS, 1974b), which was issued in 1974 to Area Health Authorities and Directors of Social Services and copied to the Schools Section of the Department of Education and Science (DES). The memorandum recommended that the Director of Education was one of the local authority representatives on the Area Review Committee. It identified the professionals who should attend case conferences and recommended that persons with statutory responsibility for the continuing care of the child should be present, alongside those responsible for the provision of services. Teachers were included in the list of those who could be invited as appropriate, along with police surgeons, and representatives of the housing department and other agencies which might have information about the child and family. The memorandum also dealt with the training of those who worked with young children and their families in order to familiarise them with all aspects of the problem, particularly the early warning signs. It recommended that the Area Review Committees monitor training and develop a training plan designed to increase knowledge, awareness and vigilance among various groups. One of these groups was staff in schools, particularly those in nursery and primary schools, as well as education welfare officers (EWOs). It was recognised, then as now, that:

“In the long run it is through training and preventative work that there are real prospects of reducing the incidence of non-accidental injury to children.”

(DHSS, 1974b, p. 5)

There is, however, little evidence of a specific ‘education voice’ in the years that followed, even though ensuring inter-agency (or inter-professional) co-operation and co-ordination had been a common theme in child abuse research for many years (Hallett and Birchall, 1992). When it was heard, it was in inquiries’ reports into the deaths of children such as Jasmine Beckford (London Borough of Brent 1985) and Kimberley Carlile (London Borough of Greenwich, 1987). There was a steady growth in the level of concern and dissatisfaction with the professional response to children, demonstrated most clearly in the Cleveland Inquiry (Butler-Sloss, 1988) into child abuse.

Bringing the concepts of child protection and child welfare together

Orr (1999) reports that in the USA social workers use the analogy of a pendulum to describe how public policy is set in relation to child welfare. Dale (1998) adopted the same analogy, describing the context of child maltreatment as a social and legal pendulum that “oscillates somewhat unpredictably between poles of prevention/family support on the one side, and child protection/rescue on the other” (p. 1). The death of a child would translate into a policy of removing children too easily from their homes. What was perceived to be overzealous removal of children would then trigger the opposite reaction, leaving too many children in dangerous settings. This seemed to describe the situation which had existed in the 1980s, when inquiries into child deaths pointed to the failure of professionals to act, and the Cleveland Inquiry castigated professionals for actions they had taken. This debate over the child welfare and child protection models dominated the development of the Children Act 1989. Parton (1991) has examined these two tracks: the first informed by research on decision making in child care (Department for Health and Social Security [DHSS], 1985a) and review (Social Services Committee, 1984 and Department for Health and Social Security [DHSS], 1985b), the second by a response to child abuse inquiries and, in particular, the reaction of the media and public to the Cleveland Inquiry.

The end result was an Act that located children in need of protection on a spectrum which embraced all children in need. The Act recognised the importance of agencies working together in a co-ordinated way and proposed a fundamental reshaping of the way in which children’s services were to be organised. Key to this were two sections of the Act: Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 places a duty on the local authority to conduct an inquiry if they have reasonable cause to suspect that a child in their area is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm; Section 17 places a general duty on the local authority to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area. The Act was, according to Parton (1991), an attempt to construct a consensus. Establishing a framework which encompassed both models was a pragmatic solution to the false dichotomy between welfare and protection. Some years later, while describing himself as a supporter of the legislation, Parton acknowledged that the challenge still lay in reconciling the conflicting energies arising from research and inquiries. He speculated there were two possible

futures: one where child welfare prevailed and the other dominated by child protection. He admitted to being biased towards pessimism:

“*In effect the central philosophy and principles of the Children Act have not been fully developed in day-to-day policy and practice. Not only are the family support aspirations and sections of the Act being implemented partially and not prioritised, but the child protection system is overloaded and not coping with the increased demands made of it.*”

(Parton, 1997a, p. 3).

There is little doubt that agencies were struggling to cope. Years earlier, in the wake of the Cleveland Inquiry, the Department of Health had commissioned a number of research studies, a summary of which was published in 1995 in the seminal document *Child Protection: Messages from Research* (Department of Health (DoH), 1995). The studies contributed to a more holistic understanding of children and their families and provided the evidence, which underpinned the argument in favour of refocusing that, dominated the discourse over children’s services for the rest of the 1990s. . It was argued that more emphasis should be placed on assessments, which would lead to the provision of services and away from evidence for care proceedings.

Challenges to the Children Act 1989

There were a number of challenges inherent in the context in which the Children Act 1989 would be implemented, and these were not given significant attention at the time. While the 1989 Act underlined collective responsibility, the dominant political philosophy of the country was one of individual and family responsibility. Although Margaret Thatcher stood down as Prime Minister in 1990, the political ethos developed during her period of government survived. Sections 27 and 47 of the Children Act 1989 placed duties on local education authorities (LEAs) to assist local authority social services departments acting on behalf of children in need or investigating allegations of abuse. At the very time when the Act was being implemented, however, the power of LEAs over schools and educational provision generally was being significantly reduced. This was happening through measures such as the introduction of formula funding, local management of schools and the option to become grant-maintained and directly answerable to the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). This meant

schools had more opportunity to loosen, and even sever, relationships with the local authority. Yet, in the context of child protection, the local authority is pivotal in that “central government legislates and local government implements” (Skocpol, 1995). Although Parton (1998) claims that schools were “absorbed into and permeated by the newly developing and increasingly pervasive mechanism of social regulation” (p. 16), there was little actual prescription on how this might be enacted. The 1988 and 1995 circulars (DES, 1988 and DfEE, 1995) could have been issued as codes of practice, with full force of statute, but as circulars are of a lesser status, they were guidance documents only.

Beyond this there were other very significant additional challenges. The first is frequently acknowledged, although its true impact is rarely recognised. The Act had proposed a fundamental reorganisation of children’s services, but it was not accompanied by a commensurate allocation of resources. Williams (1992) had no doubt that the success of the Act would depend on the implementation of the family support provisions, a view shared by Packman and Jordan (1991), who were clear that family support should have a higher priority and be jointly provided by agencies. It was hoped that, by cutting back on the number of investigations, resources would be diverted to families in need. By expanding the scope of child protection to take account of and respond to the problems that might place a child at risk, the intention was to move from a system dominated by investigation and labelling to one in which children were kept safe by giving families the support to enable them to function more safely. However, it is evident that adequate and appropriate support services were rarely available (Baginsky, 2000a) and investigations were still being prioritised. At the time when there should have been a concerted effort to engage other agencies, social services departments were swamped with referrals and left unable to forge partnerships and work collaboratively (Armytage, Boffa and Armitage, 1998). Investigation was the only service usually provided in response to many child abuse and neglect reports and, according to Sinclair and Vernon (1998), the pressure of child protection cases stopped social services meeting the requirements of joined-up working. It contributed to what then became the second of these challenges. Defensive practice, resulting from a combination of over-worked social workers operating in a context in which they will be pilloried if they make a mistake (see Payne, 1996), led to the profession being dominated by procedures (Stevenson, 1995).

The third significant challenge has not received the same level of attention but, in terms of how education could meet its enhanced role in child protection, it was just as important. Throughout the 1990s there had been an increasing emphasis on the need for joined-up government and inter-departmental co-operation, but the literature on the promotion of joint-working in the area of social welfare used terms such as “collaboration”, “co-ordination”, “inter-agency” or “multi-agency” working both interchangeably and in distinct ways (for further discussion of this see Leathard, such as 2003). The terms refer to the attempt to achieve government goals by agencies, groups and sectors working together rather than separately. They are generally regarded as highly positive forms of working in that they bring organisations together with beneficial outcomes for service users (Huxham, 1996; Huxham and Vangen, 1996). It is hard, if not impossible, to find definitions of what this means in practice in any government documentation, Implementation was hampered by the fact that what was to be achieved was ill-defined. The literature on policy implementation illustrates the tensions which can exist between central and local government (for examples see Challis *et al.*, 1988; Clarke and Stewart, 1997; Pierre and Peters, 2000). In theory the 1989 Children Act provided the solution. In practice central government devolved responsibility for its implementation, without providing sufficient guidance, to local authorities whose existence was being questioned and undermined.

Ready for Collaboration?

Numerous advantages are cited in favour of collaboration and co-operation between agencies in over child protection, including the use of resources and avoidance of duplication, and identification of different professional roles, leading to more effective services for clients. There is, however, little, if any, empirical evidence that multi-agency co-operation leads to these outcomes or to better decisions being taken and very limited understanding about how professionals make a decisions to initiate protective services for a child. Similarly, there is little experimental research to prove that inter-agency collaboration results in positive outcomes for children and families (Mulford and Rogers, 1982). Child protection policy rests on a myriad of assumptions (Melton, 2002). Relatively little is known about the effectiveness of current child abuse prevention or family support initiatives, mainly because of a failure to conduct rigorous evaluations

(Harrington and Dubowitz, 1993; Melton and Flood, 1994; Tomison, 2000). Neither has any attempt been made to distinguish the different types of co-operation that are needed for successful inter-agency collaboration.

It is questionable how far the relevant agencies were positioned to work together in the way envisaged, an issue that received relatively little attention. The Children Act 1989 and *Working Together Under the Children Act 1989* ((Home Office et al., 1991) emphasised that a more co-ordinated response would lead to

- more effective interventions
- the avoidance of failures to communicate and the duplication of services
- the clarification of agency or professional roles.

The success of collaboration depends on both individuals and their organisations. Organisational structures and processes are important for the development of collaborative activity, as are the skills of the individuals who make it all happen. However, while there would appear to be overall agreement that co-ordination in child protection is a necessary and valuable practice, it is widely recognised as being difficult to achieve (see, for example, Home Office *et al.*, 1991; Hallett and Birchall, 1992). According to Bullock and Little (1999), bureaucratic, organisational, historical and definitional barriers have all stood in the way. While *Child Protection: Messages from Research* (DoH, 1995) reinforced the need to address child maltreatment issues through collaborative ventures, it also indicated the deficits which existed. The previous year the Audit Commission (Audit Commission, 1994) had also criticised collaboration between health, social services and education. The Commission found little evidence of needs and service planning, and commented on the ambiguities which they encountered around the roles of some professionals. In their survey of 60 English local authorities Aldgate and McBeath (1993) had also found that inter-departmental social services co-ordination was poor and that there was insufficient in-service training or policy dissemination. On the other hand, intra-departmental consultation appeared significantly better, with consultation documents widely distributed internally, including within education departments. An examination of Ofsted reports on LEAs found that most referred to good or satisfactory practice in relation to child protection at a strategic level between education and social services departments, whereas most of the feedback from schools to

Ofsted inspectors was that liaison with social services was unsatisfactory or in need of significant improvement (Baginsky, 2003). The report from the inquiry into the death of Leanne White recognised that agencies were talking to each other but commented that “it is as though the message is being lost somewhere in the process” (Nottinghamshire Area Child protection Committee, 1994, p. 33). As far as education and schools are concerned, there has been a heavy concentration of the big picture, accompanied by all-embracing guidance, without examining the implications for them on every day practice. However high the commitment to the task of keeping children safe, it is not schools’ prime focus. The training which teachers have attended has focused on how they play a role in the multi-agency approach. It is not surprising that schools have seen their role as a subordinate one, but that is not the way which they are necessarily viewed by others. Denise Platt, chief inspector of the social services inspectorate (SSI), has said doctors, police officers and teachers often thought their only responsibility was to help social services, overlooking the fact that they had a distinct role to play.

The third significant challenge was the very different professional cultures of the agencies involved and the tensions, suspicions and assumptions which were engendered. This has often been noted in the literature, but little has been done to address the problems created. In the UK Cleaver and Freeman (1995) found that it was more likely that a child’s name would be added to the CPR when social services, police, hospitals or probation were involved in the initial referral. Schools were an important source of information but were a less significant influence on registration. As Scott (1993) has described, the complexities of the inter-agency world and the sources of tension between agencies involved in child protection means that some agencies are more dependent on others, some have power over others and some have blurred boundaries in relation to their responsibilities, as well as being possible competitors for government funding.

Bringing schools into the multi-agency frame – or half brought into half a frame?

Because of their day-to-day contact with children, teachers are uniquely placed to be able to detect signs of child abuse, changes of behaviour or failure to develop. Teachers are also in a particularly good position to further the personal and social development of children, although some have cast doubt on their willingness to accept this role. In 1995

Birchall and Hallett (1995) were pessimistic about the future. While they thought some teachers might welcome and undertake an enlarged pastoral role, they feared that with recent policy developments, including local management of schools, the concentration on targets of attainment and a more competitive atmosphere in the education system, would prove to be significant challenges.

In an otherwise incisive text these comments on teachers' perceptions were based on supposition. There had been very little work done to assess teachers' attitudes to this work. Pastoral work has always been fundamental in schools, as has the protection of children. However, this has only been formalised since the late 1980s. Circular 4/88 (DES, 1988) made it clear that the education system had a role in relation to child protection. This government guidance identified specific tasks for teachers and school nurses, and set the context for joint-working between schools and social services departments. The circular also recommended that "each school to designate a senior member of staff as having responsibility, under the procedures established by the LEA, for coordinating action within the school and for liaison with other agencies" (DES, 1988, p. 1). Seven years later Circular 10/95 (DfEE, 1995) set out the responsibility for child protection issues within education departments, schools and colleges, and gave guidance on links with other agencies involved in the protection of children. Each LEA was directed to appoint a senior official to have overall responsibility for the co-ordination of policy, procedures and training and, crucially, for making sure that procedures were set out in authority-wide documentation. The guidelines also reinforced the recommendation that all schools should have a senior member of staff as the designated child protection liaison co-ordinator and that this person should be adequately trained.

Birchall and Hallett (1995) commented on the difficulty of integrating teachers and general practitioners into child protection work. However, their comments reflect more a situation which had existed previously. The Children Act 1989 and *Working Together* (Home Office et al., 1991) were only implemented in the early 1990s and it took time to alert and train a profession to take a more formal role in child protection work. Training initiatives were supported by Grants for Education Support and Training (GEST) in the mid to late 1990s (See Baginsky, 2000a and b). It is a tribute to education, schools and teachers that so much was achieved so quickly at a time when they faced increasing accountability, league tables and inspection, with little kudos being awarded for child

protection work. The downside was that most training occurred in a single-agency setting without the opportunity to give due consideration to the multi-agency context of practice.

From 2000 onwards

This study was started in 2000 and continued intensively for two years and then intermittently for a further three. It was a time when the child protection system in this country was undergoing radical restructuring. In the years since the 1989 Children Act pressure on the child protection system had been mounting, with a steady rise in the numbers of referrals and the number of children being placed in care. There has also been an increase in the number of families faced with the challenges of mental health problems, alcohol or substance abuse, and domestic violence coming to the attention of the authorities. The dilemma between child protection and welfare, which some 16 years earlier had led to the development of the Children Act 1989, had not been solved. Much of the thinking around child protection had continued to be shaped by inquiries into child deaths at the hands of their parents or carers. The reports of these inquiries invariably contained details of how indicators of abuse failed to produce a reaction and how agencies failed to speak to one another. The Victoria Climbié Inquiry established that in the 10 months that she lived in the UK none of the child protection agencies that she came into contact with discovered her real name or the relationship with the great-aunt who murdered her. None of the professionals who saw Victoria tried to find out why she had not been registered with a GP and didn't attend school, even though these services are regarded as crucial to safeguarding children.

Focusing on the way in which child death inquiries have shaped the child protection system in recent decades Parton (1997b) reflects on Dingwall and colleagues' (1995) contention that increasing emphasis on procedures had meant that the focus in child protection cases has shifted from taking the right decision to taking the defensible decision. This was a central issue in the debate over reform of the child protection system following the death of Victoria Climbié. Lord Laming, the Chairman of the Climbié inquiry, promised that the case would mark a turning point in the care of children. As this research project developed the number of initiatives designed to counter social exclusion and support children and families multiplied. In part these were an attempt to meet the government target for reducing the number of children in low-income households. The

integration of children's social care into the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) in 2003 created a single departmental focus for children, with the rationale of improving co-ordination within children's services (including family and parenting support), and between these services and schools and education. A new post of Minister for Children, Young People and Families was created within the DfES to co-ordinate policy across government.

Another child's death was also shaping policy. Lauren Wright died in May 2000 and the subsequent inquiry detailed failings on the part of the health authority and social services, and highlighted shortcomings in LEA procedures. Poor communication between health, social services and education professionals was found to have led to a failure to protect Lauren from 17 months of physical abuse. Lauren had been seen by social workers on several occasions but was not on the CPR. Her stepmother had explained that Lauren's injuries were the results of domestic accidents, and teachers, as well as relatives, neighbours, social workers, GPs and paediatricians did not question this. The inquiry was concerned that Lauren's school did not have a teacher trained in child protection, which was a breach of local authority guidelines. The governing body of the school accepted collective responsibility for having no designated child protection teacher at the time. The NSPCC said the case was one of the most disturbing it had come across and the local MP Gillian Shephard, a former Secretary of State for Education, described it as being "worse than the Victoria Climbié case in my opinion because it all took place in full view of those people who should have been caring for Lauren Wright" (*Guardian*, 2 October 2001).

Despite the fact that the inquiry report detailed a series of errors, the most significant impact was, in fact, felt in education. After extensive lobbying by the NSPCC and Gillian Shephard, a late amendment was introduced into the Education Bill which was then before Parliament. This amendment became Section 175 of the Education Act 2002. The section requires local education authorities and governing bodies of maintained schools and further education institutions to ensure that their functions are carried out with a view to safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children (Section 157 places similar requirements on independent schools). The safeguarding duty covers not only the protection of individual children but issues such as pupil health, addressing bullying, medical needs, substance misuse and the like, many of which are subject to separate requirements. LEAs and governing bodies must also have regard to any guidance issued

by the Secretary of State with regard to meeting the requirements of Section 175. The section came into effect in July 2004 and was followed in the September by new guidance, *Safeguarding Children in Education* (DfES, 2004b), which replaced Circular 10/95.

Most of the work for this study was carried out prior to the introduction of the Education Act 2002 and *Safeguarding Children in Education*. Although there may be the occasional reference in this report to the concept of 'safeguarding', the focus was on child protection. Similarly, the term social services was usually used even though in one of the study areas the local education authority and social services department had merged into what was an early version of a children's service department.

2 Methodology

The research task was to gain a clearer picture of what happens when the two agencies are brought together by examining, from the schools' viewpoint:

- How schools addressed child protection concerns and what led them to make referrals
- What happened when schools made what they considered to be child protection referrals.

There is a need for qualitative research that recounts and explores the experience of practitioners in order to illuminate and inform this process. Wattam (1997) has argued that to understand the child protection system it is necessary to understand how social workers make judgements and decisions in practice. As more emphasis is placed on the multi-agency approach to safeguarding children, it is vital to understand how other professionals reach decisions and construct the system within which they are operating, as well as reflect on decisions made.

The aim was to collect information on, and discuss, all suspected child maltreatment cases which were picked up and referred to social services by the schools in the study, as well as those cases which were being given cause for concern but which had not yet been referred. When a case was passed to social services, every effort would then be made to track it to determine what then happened in order to understand how the two agencies were viewing the same cases.

By examining both the decision making processes in schools which lead to child protection referrals to social services and the response that they then received, the aim was to determine the factors which encourage effective communication and those which impede it, and to make recommendations for more effective practice in relation to child protection procedures in schools, LEAs and social services departments. In order to look at how schools took the decision to refer and at what then happened, it was decided to work with a sample of schools in four local authorities over a period of a school year.

Determining the approach for this study

In the planning stage a range of methods and approaches were examined to identify which would be most suitable and reliable for this study. The design of this study was influenced by the work of two teams of researchers in Australia. Goddard and colleagues (Goddard, 1988; Goddard and Hiller, 1992; Goddard *et al.*, 1996) conducted tracking studies within hospitals. Where children had been admitted after suffering maltreatment, the cases were “tracked” to determine the respective roles of police units and child protection services. These studies combined qualitative and quantitative techniques: they examined case records, collected demographic and family data on the children involved and conducted semi-structured interviews, alongside participant observation. A key element was the desire to capture workers’ perceptions of how cases were managed. Similarly, Tomison (1994) designed an evaluation to examine the decision making of the professionals involved in the management of suspected and confirmed child abuse and neglect cases. His intention was to map a child protection system over a six-month period, to examine the role of the various professions and to identify which factors influenced the decisions. In both these studies the researchers conducted what they termed “epidemiological studies” to reach a better understanding of how decision-making worked; they focused on the how the decision emerged rather than what the decision itself. This study was informed by, rather than modelled on, the work of these researchers. It shared their intention to attempt to follow or “track” cases between organisations and to examine the management of cases and the perceptions of individuals. In order to look at how schools took the decision to refer and at what then happened, it was decided to work with a sample of schools in four local authorities over a period of a school year. Case tracking studies are complex and typically require significant lead time in order to gain permissions, access and the participation of the various agencies or professional groups under investigation. For example, Tomison (1994) took approximately two years to complete negotiations, develop the tracking materials, and brief the participants, before the main tracking study began. Although this study did not employ the same tracking methodology as Tomison, there were points of similarity over process and issues.

Although the intention was to span schools and social work teams, the primary focus was on the former. The aim was to identify *how* a decision was arrived at, alongside the surrounding events and challenges, and what then happened in terms of decision making

and case management, rather than looking at the outcome itself. It was essentially descriptive research combining elements of interviewing and direct observation. It did not include archival analysis. As useful as this would have been, it was beyond the resources of this research project. Qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection were employed: the case study work in schools was combined with surveys of all schools in the local authorities at two points in time.

On one level the survey and pro forma data provided the backdrop against which it was possible to corroborate or question the qualitative data from the interviews, but they also provided rich data in their own right. The two techniques complemented each other. The approach is not without its critics, but attempting to establish knowledge on the basis of findings corroborated by data gathered through different techniques has much to commend it, (See Patton, 1980). Although the impact of changes at authority level and the influences of various initiatives were taken into account, the emphasis in both the qualitative and quantitative work was on how the individuals behaved and how they perceived the environment in which they worked. It was conducted in the spirit which Spindler and Spindler's (1992) applied to their qualitative approach to quantitative data: "Instrumentation and quantification are simply procedures to extend and reinforce certain kinds of data, interpretations and test hypotheses across samples. Both must be kept in their place. One must avoid their premature or overly extensive use as a security mechanism" (p. 69).

In this study both sets of data have been analysed and reported separately; both have been "kept in their place".

Arriving at the sample

A process of random sampling of local authorities resulted in one shire authority, one London authority and two cities. Given the nature of the research design, the co-operation of schools and social work teams would be required, so the approval of the local education authorities and social services departments was necessary. The process to gain approval commenced in the early autumn of 1999, with the intention of starting the initial visits to schools in two authorities in the summer term of 2000, with fieldwork starting in these two authorities at the start of the school year the following September. The process

of negotiation was different in all four authorities, but equally lengthy. The negotiations took between six and nine months. The London authority was in the process of moving into private management after a period of crisis and, although it did not formally withdraw, after a period of protracted negotiations when letters and phone calls went unanswered, it was assumed that there had been a de facto withdrawal. The fieldwork was already underway in two authorities and negotiations progressing in the third and so, in view of the time which could be expected around negotiating entry to another area, it was decided to limit the study to three authorities.

Descriptions of the three local authorities

The three authorities have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Moleshire

Moleshire is a large county council in the south of England, divided into four administrative areas. The proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals is smaller than the national average. Seven per cent of the school population comes from black and minority ethnic groups. Pupils' attainment on entry to primary schools is above average and they go on to attain standards which are higher than those achieved nationally at all key stages up to the age of 16. Unemployment rates are below the national average, but there are pockets of deprivation. The research was concentrated in one part of one of the administrative areas. The schools involved in the research served predominantly white populations in two areas of deprivation. Both areas were in the top 25 per cent of areas nationally for child poverty as measured by the Child Poverty Index (CPI) score.¹

In the late nineties the then local education authority had created an education welfare post in each of the four administrative areas. The post holders were appointed to advise,

¹ The child poverty index is a subset of the income domain index and shows the percentage of children in each ward that live in families that claim means tested benefits

support and train school and education staff on Child Protection matters and as a member of the Child Protection Teams in a specified Quadrant, to contribute to multi-agency child protection work, from an educational perspective. The main responsibilities were, amongst others, to

- prepare for and participate in Child Protection Conferences
- take forward the recommendations of the conferences that relate to school and educational matters
- contribute expertise from an educational perspective to Section 47 investigations, including strategy meetings
- provide a consultative service to head teachers, designated teachers for child protection and other education based staff on child protection matters
- identify child protection training needs amongst school and other educationally based staff
- develop appropriate training
- facilitate effective liaison and communication between schools and other agencies involved in child protection work.

These posts are referred to in this report as specialist Education Welfare (EW) posts and the post holders as specialist education welfare officers (SEWOs).

Riversdale

Riversdale is a city with high levels of deprivation and unemployment. Members of minority ethnic groups form a smaller proportion of the population than nationally. At the time of the study the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals was more than twice the national figure. Standards at the end of primary education were below the national average and even lower at the end of secondary education. An Ofsted inspection of the LEA determined that work with social services and other agencies was well coordinated, but during the inspection schools were critical of how this was implemented in relation to day-to-day work. Ofsted criticised the wide brief given to education welfare service, which included: responsibility for school attendance; welfare of pupils; legal

proceedings; exclusions and “education otherwise”; child protection; child employment; and escort duties. Ofsted found the service was failing to improve the attendance of pupils. Following this inspection report there were major reforms in the LEA’s structure, policy and organisation. Many staff left the authority and a new senior management team was appointed. The Ofsted report also stated that the LEA must ensure that the work of EWOs was of a consistently high standard and well-targeted. Subsequently the service was restructured and a third of the workforce left. Although the service retained some functions in respect of child protection and exclusions, most of its time was focused on improving the level of pupil attendance.

Valesdown

Valesdown is a city of contrasts with areas of considerable prosperity and others with significant levels of disadvantage and deprivation. It has a significant numbers of pupils from a wide range of minority ethnic groups, many of whom live in the disadvantaged areas. At the time of this study the number of pupils in primary and secondary schools entitled to free school meals was above the national average and had increased in recent years... Standards in primary schools conformed to national averages but those in secondary schools fell below these. An Ofsted inspection report in 2000 described the LEA’s provision as unsatisfactory or poor in two-thirds of those aspects assessed, but it did commend the links developed between the LEA and the social services department and with other agencies. Some years earlier an external report had been highly critical of the delays by senior management in the LEA in reviewing procedures in response to a serious child protection case, but the Ofsted report noted that there was evidence that improvements were taking place. The department had strengthened its internal child protection systems and procedures. Checks were made to ensure that all schools had up-to-date information about child protection procedures and knew the action to take when dealing with cases of suspected or identified abuse. Nevertheless, the criticisms levelled by Ofsted had led to the education function being handed over to a not-for-profit company owned by the City Council, which had been directed to employ a private company to provide strategic capacity to assist in the provision of the services.

Negotiating access

The path for negotiating access to the schools and social work teams was different in the three areas, although the initial approach was through the lead officer for child protection in the LEAs. In Moleshire the education welfare service played a prominent role in child protection and a senior manager co-ordinated meetings with key individuals and groups in both education and social services. In Riversdale an Assistant Director in the education department liaised with the researcher and staff in both his own department and in social services. Before final approval was given the researcher had attended six meetings with different groups, including one where a councillor was present. In Valesdown all communication was through the Director of Education and one Assistant Director, who negotiated directly with the Director of Social Services to obtain permission for the research project to go ahead.

The numerous meetings which the researcher attended in Moleshire and Riversdale provided opportunities for the methodology to be discussed and aspects of the study to be carefully examined. In both local authorities it was agreed that it would be important for the research to be confined to identified area teams so that social workers would be aware of the research project and the researcher would not contact people who may not understand the process or intention.

Schools within the catchment of area teams were stratified into primary, secondary and special schools, and randomly sampled within these groupings and placed in priority lists. The intention was to arrive at a ratio of ten primary, three secondary and one special in each authority. It was judged to be necessary to have this number of schools in order to be able to secure an adequate number of referrals to study. The majority of schools which had been sampled agreed to participate and where a school refused the next school on the list, in the appropriate category, was approached. In Valesdown two schools which had agreed to take part and where initial pre-project meetings had been held, subsequently withdrew one month into the project for staffing reasons. The next two schools on the list were immediately approached and agreed to take part. It was agreed that if schools were to be inspected by Ofsted during the period of the project or were notified of such an inspection immediately subsequent to the sampling they would not be included in the sample. This decision, combined with the time that some schools took to agree to

participate, meant that the final sample did not conform to the intended ratio of special, primary and secondary. The final sample comprised 43 schools. Table 2.1 contains details of the schools in the sample.

Table 2.1 Sample of schools according to sector and phase

	Moleshire	Riversdale	Valesdown
Special primary	-	1	-
Special secondary	1	1	-
Special all-age	-	-	1
Mainstream nursery	-	1	1
Mainstream infant	1	-	-
Mainstream junior	1	1	1
Mainstream all age primary	7	5	8
Mainstream secondary	4	5	4
Total	14	14	15

A description of the schools in the sample is contained in Appendix A.

Ethical considerations

Although direct access to any children was not required, there had to be some way of tagging a referral across schools and social services. In one authority detailed discussions had taken place about the possibility of giving children identity codes instead of sharing their names with the researcher. The idea was abandoned as being unworkable and -

although discussed in the other two authorities - it was generally agreed that the only feasible alternative was for the researcher to have the names of children. The researcher asked all three authorities if it would be necessary under their procedures to take the proposal to a research ethics committee but this was not required. The methodology was discussed with experienced researchers in various institutions to obtain their views on the ethical challenges. They confirmed the safeguards established to protect anonymity and data security.

According to Tomison and Goddard (1999), virtually all case tracking studies conducted to date have proceeded without informed consent of children or their families. They recognise that although fully informed consent is highly desirable, the procedures required for obtaining consent in case tracking studies are likely to be cumbersome and counter-productive as this would rely on over-stretched professionals approaching families. In this study the three authorities accepted that the researcher would have access to the identities of children and would establish the appropriate safeguards and secure systems to ensure that no one else was able to identify a child or family. The researcher agreed to discuss this issue with each social worker involved in the case tracking exercise to determine if they were willing to agree to participation under these conditions. Only one social worker chose to seek parental consent before discussing the facts of the case with the researcher.

Another concern of both researcher and the staff with whom the project was negotiated in the three local authorities was that the research process might affect the ways in which professionals and agencies interacted, but this was balanced against the fact that the project stretched over a period of a year in each area which would provide the opportunity to gain a more rounded picture.

Implementing the approach

The fieldwork consisted of the following:

Contact with schools

On-going contact was maintained with each school in the three authorities over a period of a year – Riversdale and Moleshire in 2000/1 and Valesdown in 2001/2. During the

initial visit with each school a timetable of visits was agreed which allowed one visit each half term. The school had the researcher's contact details and agreed to make contact if there was a significant development and the next visit was some time off.

In a few instances schools in Riversdale and Valesdown received fewer visits than planned. Fieldwork was concentrated into a series of week long visits to each authority during which time all schools were visited. If a school cancelled an appointment during that week which could not then be immediately rearranged, a visit would have to be postponed until the next fieldwork period, although it was usually possible in these circumstances to arrange a telephone conversation to catch up on immediate history.

The main contact in each school was the designated teacher for child protection. Where there were two designated teachers, one was identified to be the main point of contact. Semi-structured interviews were conducted during the first visits, covering details of the designated teacher's (or teachers') experience along with an exploration of the way in which the school and teachers had been involved in child protection in the recent past. The interviews also provided the first opportunity to collect details of any child protection referrals which had been made to social services since the start of the school year. During the subsequent visits teachers provided updates on the referrals already discussed as well as details of new referrals and other relevant information, such as any training or inter-agency meetings they had attended. The process allowed for aggregated data to be collected in the course of a series of in-depth interviews

Contact with social services

Once schools had passed on the names of children for whom they had made referrals in relation to child protection and children in need concerns, it was necessary for the researcher to contact a named social worker, where these details were available, or the duty team, to attempt to find out what had happened to the referral. In some cases this proved to be reasonably straightforward, but in others it was a tortuous process. In most cases the initial contact would be made when the researcher was working in the area conducting the regular interviews with schools, but where this proved impossible, follow-up was over the telephone and even by letter. As call centres became more widespread it was often difficult to get past the switchboard, despite the research project having been approved by the local authority and staff having been informed that this was the case.

Contact with key LEA and SSD staff

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior managers and lead officers with responsibility for child protection in the three local authorities in order to examine the structures, policies and procedures which were in place, as well as explore their views on how well these operated and provide the opportunity for wider comment and reflection.

Other contacts

As the study developed various other opportunities arose. The researcher attended heads of year meetings in most of the secondary schools and staff meetings in most of the primary schools to explain the research project, as well as team meetings in the social services departments. A head teachers' forum in Riversdale was aware of the project and invited the researcher to one of their regular meetings. At this meeting they discussed their experiences of working with social services over child protection concerns. Similarly, two discussion groups took place with EWOs in Riversdale. In Moleshire the EWOs with responsibility for child protection met as a group with the researcher on two occasions, and one to one interviews were also conducted with two post-holders. The researcher also attended training events, meetings for designated teachers and inter-agency forums whenever possible.

All interviews and group discussions were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants and were transcribed. In the case of the teachers taking part in the research project the transcript of the previous interview was examined at the next visit. In the case of other one-off interviews participants' transcripts were offered but rarely wanted.

A survey of all schools in the three authorities:

This was conducted at the end of the year's involvement in each authority to allow similar issues to those raised in participating schools be explored, albeit in less detail and by a different method, with a larger number of respondents. This survey was repeated in June 2005.

In addition, quantitative and qualitative information was collected through a pro forma in summer term 2004, and return visits to the majority of schools involved in the research project in the autumn term of 2004 and spring term of 2005.

Retrieving and storing data

Only essential information to allow cases to be discussed was collected. The names of the children, schools, teachers, social workers and any other individual were removed from transcripts. A series of identifying numerical codes were then used. A card file was created which linked identities and numerical codes. This was kept in a locked cupboard, separate from the data. When the analysis was complete, this file and all information which could identify any individuals and link them with any institution were destroyed.

Analysis

The interpretation of the qualitative data is based in the accounts of those who took part in the interviews throughout the research project. The data were analysed using the analysis method framework (Richie and Spencer, 1994). It is a matrix-based analytic method which allows a systematic and transparent analysis, ensuring validity and reliability in interpreting findings. It is dependent on the researcher becoming familiar with the data through reading the material in order to establish themes and concepts. These form a conceptual framework (Ritchie and Spencer also call this an “index”).

In keeping with the analytic method each theme was sub-divided into a series of sub-themes as the analysis proceeded. The data were applied to the framework. The transcripts were read carefully and marked to indicate that a particular theme was mentioned. Although it is possible to do this electronically using a CAQDAS programme, here it was done manually. Multiple themes and interconnections were also indexed. As the process developed it was necessary to make sure that the indexing remained consistent. The marked transcripts were then photocopied to retain a copy of the original in order to allow further manipulation and cross-identification of the themes at a later stage. Then the data were brought together using “thematic sets” suggested by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). Sometimes the data went under one heading, in other cases it was multiply located. The transition from analysis to synthesis is not one-directional. It requires constant revisiting of the data in its raw state to its near synthesised form, but this becomes less frequent as the data reaches its final synthesised form. The survey data was coded and analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Reporting the data

The participating local authorities were guaranteed anonymity and have been given pseudonyms in the report. Similarly, all names used in examples have been changed. In some cases minor changes have been made when describing cases to avoid the possibility that individuals could be identified. Not all referrals are reported in this document as the intention is to draw out the issues that emerged, rather than provide the minutiae of the data.

Reflection on the methodology and process

The researcher had regular contact with the 43 schools over a school year and intermittent contact in the following two years. In contrast to one-off interviews and even follow-up studies there was a very high level of contact between the researcher and teachers. On average the researcher met with each teacher on eight occasions; in one case there were only six contacts and in four instances there were nine visits. There was also intermittent on-going contact with some social workers, although in most cases the contact was a one-off. It has been argued that interviewing the same individuals may result in an over-identification and involvement of researchers with their subjects (see, for example, O'Connell-Davidson and Layder, 1994). The traditional approach to interviewing recommends distance between the interviewer and interviewee, a holding back of the researcher's feelings and background. This has been questioned by interactionist sociologists such as Becker (1971) and Oakley (1981; 1997), who suggest that interviews should be more conversational. Indeed social researchers are increasingly becoming aware of how the researcher's self is part of the research process (Ellis, 1991; Kleinman and Copp, 1993). But this, in turn, demands a degree of reflexivity on the part of the researcher in relation to the impact of their values, attitudes and perceptions on the research process (Abbott and Wallace, 1990).

Influenced by the work of researchers such as Oakley (1981) every effort was made in this study to conduct interviews in a way which involved the interviewees in the research process as much as possible. Initially the researcher did not regard the interviewer/interviewee relationship – a researcher interviewing senior staff in schools,

LEAs and social services – in terms of Oakley’s ‘power relationships’. In retrospect, perhaps more consideration should have been paid to the possible influence of the fact that the research was conducted by a member of the NSPCC’s research team. There is evidence that some people are cautious of engaging with an agency which is known to be proactive in protecting children and may as a result be thought to be judgmental of anything other than best practice (see Baginsky, 2004). All participants were informed that if it was felt that a child was at risk and if a school did not then take the necessary steps to make a referral the researcher would have to do so, but this was never received negatively and never had to be acted upon. Participants were also told that of the researcher’s educational research background and were given additional appropriate information as requested.

Tomison (1994) warned of the tensions which might exist between professionals and researcher. He quoted Stevenson’s (1992) observation that “increasingly, social workers in the field of child care were under hostile scrutiny” (p. 30). This, he emphasised, meant researchers had to convince participants of their neutrality and that the research findings would not be misused. In this study after the initial difficulties of recruiting schools in Valesdown explained above, there were no problems in gaining and maintaining the co-operation of teachers. This was also the case with most social workers, but there were difficulties over initial engagement and establishing telephone or face-to-face contact. This was aggravated not only by the pressures on staff working in under-staffed teams and call centre filtering of contacts, but also by offices closing and teams being reorganised. However, if social workers or teachers felt threatened in anyway they never made it explicit. Overall the level of engagement was very good, which may have been helped by two factors. Firstly, it was emphasised that the intention was not to evaluate individual workers, but to identify issues of inter-agency communication and case management within the local authorities; and secondly, time was devoted to negotiating and explaining the study.

Although the interviews with designated teachers took place regularly, they still took place only once every six to seven weeks, which meant they focused mainly on past rather than current actions with the inherent the risk of post-hoc reconstruction. Nevertheless, the ongoing interviews with participants allowed cases to unfold and provided deeper insights into context of inter-agency work. It is possible that some teachers accidentally excluded cases; they were all busy people and did not always come

to meetings with their records. It is possible that some cases were withheld for fear of criticism or embarrassment. There was one instance where this might have happened and which is examined in the report, although it could also have arisen because of poor communication within the school. In schools where there were two designated teachers the one who acted as the link for the purposes of the research was not always aware of all current cases. It is also worth noting that no instances of allegations against any member of school staff were reported and so it was not possible to examine how any such case would have been dealt with.

There were some missing cases, which it was not possible to trace through to social services. In some cases the researcher and contacts in social services decided that while the school may have thought they were making a referral, social services had interpreted the contact as a consultation. This would be one reason why schools reported not having heard anything further about a referral. Sometimes the referrals appeared to have 'disappeared' with social services being unable to explain what had happened.

3 Referring cases to social services: decisions, dilemmas and confusion

“Failing to report exposes children to serious injury and even death. On the other hand, a report triggers what may be a deeply traumatic experience for all members of the family. And inappropriate reports ... increase the burdens on chronically understaffed agencies.”

(Besharov, 1990, p. 34).

Putting referrals in context

A ‘referral’ is defined in *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (Department of Health et al., 1999, updated 2006) as “a request for services to be provided by the social services department.” Referring a case to social services is a very serious action. It creates anxiety and concern, as well as sometimes raising doubts about whether it is the most appropriate course of action or even whether, in the long term, it is in the child’s best interest. The long-term outcomes of referrals and subsequent services provided for children are poorly researched so the best interests of the child are not necessarily obvious.

In the 1970s there were indications that teachers in the USA were not reporting child abuse at the rate which might have been expected (Pelcovitz, 1980). Gelles (1975) had found that teachers he interviewed suspected large numbers of their pupils were abused, but they were reluctant to report this. He speculated that this might have been for two reasons: they might have judged it to be incompatible with their role as teachers and/or with maintaining relationships with parents. Viano (1974) had found that police were more likely to report suspected abuse than educators and thought that this was possibly the result of police having more impersonal relationships with those suspected than teachers would with parents. However, when Pelcovitz (1980) carried out a detailed study of 135 elementary teachers in a Philadelphia school district, he did not find teachers to be reluctant to report; rather they believed it was their professional responsibility to do so.

Only a minority expressed any concerns for their own safety, but a quarter did have some concerns about what the parent might do to the child. However, this willingness to report abuse did not translate into their practice, which varied significantly between schools. These differences could not be explained by their catchment areas. While one school accounted for 90 per cent of the reported cases of abuse in the district, other schools rarely made any referrals. However, possible reasons emerged in the interviews with these teachers. As well as those who feared damaging relationships with parents, there were those who believed that a high level of evidence was required. There were also those who thought it would be best to deal with the problem themselves by meeting with parents and attempting to encourage more acceptable behaviour. The most significant influence on the reporting rate was the approach of the Principal. Those who were not supportive of reporting assumed the position either to protect the reputation of their schools or because they had failed to understand their responsibilities.

In the USA Portwood (1999) examined the extent to which there was a consensus among professionals and parents as to what constituted abuse. Teachers tended to rate abuse as significantly more abusive than either legal or medical professionals. Portwood suggests that this may be because teachers spend more time with children than the other two types of professionals.

In this country Miller *et al.* (1993) studied all the children referred as being “at risk” in one local authority over a 12-month period. A third of the referrals came from “informal sources”, that is, referrals from family and neighbours, as well as anonymous referrals and self-referrals. Eighteen per cent came from education², 16 per cent from other parts of the local authority, 17 per cent from health professionals and the remaining 14 per cent originating from other sources such as the police. The researchers found that 90 per cent of referrals made by social workers went to conference compared with 28 per cent of those referred anonymously. The authors did not explore the decision-making behind whether cases were taken to conference, but explanations for the differing rates might have include referrals being taken more seriously if made by certain types of professionals, and anonymous referrals being more difficult to substantiate. Despite the

² It is possible that a proportion of these referrals came from the EWO service, which had a wider role at the time compared with the emphasis on attendance that became marked later in the decade.

fact that they were the largest source of referrals, less than half the referrals from education went to a conference. There are many possible explanations, and it is worth considering a few of them. Perceptions of different professionals may have differed, as they had in Portwood's study. It is also worth bearing in mind that, while teacher's may have been aware of the guidance in Circular 4/88 (DES, 1988), the training provided on child protection only increased significantly after this date, so it is possible that many of the "referrals" at the time when Miller and colleagues were conducting their research could have been classed as "concerns". Perhaps it also reflects the fact that there was a growing awareness in schools of their responsibility to be involved in a multi-agency approach to child protection.

As in the early US studies there were teachers involved in the study reported here who had doubts that a referral was the appropriate route to take, especially whether in the long term it was in the child's best interest. They had concerns about thresholds for intervention and about the failure of social services to respond to what schools had judged to be serious risks to children. But there was also high level of uncertainty around definitions, identification, shared understandings, sharing of information with agencies and informing parents. Some of these grey areas are discussed below and in other sections of this report.

Thresholds

The Children Act 1989 imposed duties on local authorities and other bodies in relation to investigation and reporting of suspected abuse of children by adults. These include, under s.47 (1) (b), a duty on the local authority to investigate reports of child abuse. This duty is "triggered" by reasonable cause to suspect that a child who lives or is found in their area is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm. Section 47(4) states that in conducting the investigation the local authority shall take such steps as are reasonably practicable to obtain access to the child or to ensure access is obtained by a person authorised for this purpose, for example a health visitor or police officer. The Act defines harm as "ill treatment or the impairment of health or development including sexual abuse and non-physical ill-treatment" (s.31), but it has been criticised for failing to provide a clear definition of abuse. Child abuse is not an absolute concept. Most behaviour has to be seen in context before it can be thought of as maltreatment and it is seldom a single event or

incident. A child protection intervention is based on a decision of what constitutes ‘significant harm’. In turn that appears to be determined by the threshold for action which is decided locally, and in practice it is a pragmatic response to the available resources. Without doubt the interpretation of ‘significant harm’ complicates matters; it is not clear in legislation or guidance when harm becomes “significant”, but it is the measure against which thresholds are set. In his report into the death of Victoria Climbié Lord Laming expressed his disapproval of the process forcefully:

“The use of eligibility criteria to restrict access to services is not found either in legislation or in guidance, and its ill-founded application is not something I support. Only after a child and his or her home circumstances have been assessed can such criteria be justified in determining the suitability of a referral, the degree of risk and the urgency of the response.”

(Laming, 2003, para 1.53)

While there is a concern that thresholds are currently set at a high level, they were the markers associated with professional assessments of risk which were used to allocate scarce resources in this study. As the thresholds were the determinants of the type of intervention, if any, which followed a referral, it would seem fundamental to multi-agency practice that there should have been a shared understanding across education and social services of the nature of the thresholds and their impact on the child protection system. The findings of this study suggest that in reality this was not the case.

Call centres

All three areas had introduced call centres in one form or another. The intention was to increase uniformity of the response by establishing a central intake point for receiving reports of suspected child abuse and neglect. Although the details differed in each area, the problems encountered were similar. In Moleshire, for example, the key words “child protection” would mean the call would go straight to Client Services who would take information about the child. This was not taken by a social worker but someone trained in receiving referrals. The information would then be faxed, phoned or emailed to the District Team. It was soon apparent that the system was not working well. Teachers were

reluctant to reveal details to an anonymous call centre and so they were told to contact a client service centre directly. These centres had been established to meet the complaints targeted at call centres. Schools were confused. Not only did they move from an established system of contacting their local social services area office, they then moved from one set of directions to another very quickly. There were also difficulties once a referral was passed to the district team concerned. The idea had been to make the process completely electronic but there were problems with the computer system. In some cases schools continued to try to contact those social workers they knew, but this was also problematic as the reorganisation meant many had changed offices and contact numbers. This primary head teacher's experience was not unusual:

I know of a colleague who has spent half an hour just holding on. When I made my last referral, I was sent all round the houses and then they could not get hold of anyone. There is a lot of that. I think it is sometimes because no one is available. I have been given the one stop number. But now I would phone the local office. I am not easy about giving children's details to just anyone. There have been times when I have been so frustrated about not being able to get through to social services that I have even thought about phoning the police. I would do it, if I were really worried. (Head teacher, primary school, Moleshire)

Perhaps the most significant issue was the fact that schools saw the call centre system as contrary to the philosophy that they thought lay behind bringing education and children's social care into a unified system. This was a view frequently expressed and well summarised by this deputy head of a secondary school:

The reality is that you have a system designed to draw groups closer together and then there is the call centre which actually pushes things further apart. I think for it to work effectively it needs to get back to the point where I have a designated contact person, that I can get through to immediately and I would hope that that person is in a position to get back to me immediately. That is the way I understand the system has been designed, yet the call centre acts against this. (Deputy Head teacher, secondary school, Moleshire)

Teachers felt marginalised by the arrangements and by the lack of information. Schools had not been provided with office numbers so lists obtained from school nurses and other professionals were circulating. Social workers were sympathetic to the complaints which

they heard. They knew that teachers were subjected to a very inquisitorial system when they wished to make a referral or have a consultation:

Even when they knew who they wished to speak to, they have to jump through a hoop. Most of the time they know who they want to speak to and they are right. (Social worker, Moleshire)

One head teacher had been reasonably optimistic that the problems he had experienced in the early months would disappear. However, 15 months later he was far less optimistic:

At the moment it is not an improvement on the old system as you don't have direct access, immediate access to a duty officer unless you actually press for it. You have to sound desperate, I think, before they put you through to a duty officer. I don't find that very comfortable. The process is we have a number which directs us to a switchboard. There we ask either for a named person or you give the situation. Now I am not happy about that anyway, but they insist that they know the nature of the event. I have asked for an emergency duty officer and been told there is a two day waiting list, and I am saying "But this is an emergency", and I had to push for that and that was last week. I eventually got through to a person who said they would phone me back soon. Well two or three hours went by, and that was not soon to me, and so I phoned them back and said "I want to speak to a duty officer now, I have phoned once and it is about ..." and I gave the child's name and they put me through to a duty officer then and things began to happen. But there is that delay. (Head teacher, primary school, Moleshire)

In Riversdale a council call centre dealt with all enquiries from drains and bins to child protection. Many teachers lived in the city and were used to using that number if they needed to contact the council about their own domestic matters, and this led to various responses from confusion and disbelief to refusal to conform:

How can you think about providing the one number for all these things? Even with effective filtering it is not acceptable professional practice. (Senior teacher, secondary school, Riversdale)

Again management of social services quickly identified a problem in that the changes had happened in a very haphazard way and without an appropriate information strategy.

Stories abounded about quite ludicrous situations, such as this account provided by a social worker:

There was a very distressed woman in reception and she said she needed to make a referral. We said we did not take direct referrals, but that she could phone the call centre, which she did and they took the referral from her. Some minutes later they phoned the duty manager here, who had walked passed her several times, and after a delay of half an hour, he dealt with her. (Social worker, Riversdale)

Schools were told informally that they had the option of talking directly to social workers about concerns. However, social services offices in the city were notoriously difficult to contact and even after the call centre was introduced this did not become easier. Prior to the introduction of the call centre, referrals had been taken by local social services teams using trained workers, albeit not social workers. Social workers were concerned that this expertise would disappear in a rush to implement information systems:

... but the consistent answer that is going to be given to everyone is ring the call centre, whatever you want, and they will put you through. They will take a note of what you asked and it will be timed and quality assured and the information will be gathered so we become a more intelligent organisation in the future. The arguments roll off the tongue easily. (Social worker, Riversdale)

If the senior executives in an organisation have made this change, why have they done it? Has it been made to afford greater protection to children? And I am afraid the answer is probably “no”. The change has been made for another reason and we have to make do and mend on the protection issue. The culture prevails where protection does not have the importance which it should. This is the case in other areas. But we are dealing with children’s lives here. (Social worker, Riversdale)

In Valesdown designated teachers said they would be able to get to a telephone if there was a real emergency or an urgent referral, but they too were frustrated at having to go through a call centre:

To then be put on hold when you only have a 15 minute break is really frustrating. The other thing I find difficult is that in a relatively short space of time you have to get across what it is you are concerned about. I think they are trained admin staff who are typing as

I speak and then it electronically goes through to duty. I preferred the old system especially if there was someone at duty that I knew. (Senior teacher, primary school, Valesdown)

I had to refer a case of sexual abuse via the call centre. It worked eventually, but it had taken me about 20 minutes to get through. It was engaged and I had to keep trying and then wait. The ones who take the calls are not social workers so you are having to wait while they write everything down. I have referred cases where they have got it wrong and then things are passed on wrongly. Stories change down the line and that is terrible. You don't get to talk to a social worker then – they have to call you back. Under the old system you built up a rapport. I know they feel the same. The lack of communication is becoming a barrier. (Senior teacher, secondary school, Valesdown)

Such experiences led teachers in the three authorities to question whether or not there was a shared understanding of process, and to raise questions about the training that call staff had received:

On one occasion I was in a queue trying to make a referral and then they would not take it because they said it was a child in need referral, a Section 17 referral. They said they did not deal with those, so they obviously did not understand the procedures. They told me to ring the duty desk and I knew I would not get anywhere with that. I did phone the duty desk and although the social worker could not take the referral he gave me a number I could call to complain. So after half an hour I had not actually made the referral. (Head teacher, primary school, Valesdown)

A designated teacher in a secondary school in Riversdale had gone through the call centre after a 14-year-old girl disclosed past abuse by her stepfather. As well as wanting support for the girl, who was very distressed following a long conversation with another member of staff, the stepfather was, in fact, now living with a woman who had two young daughters. The person who took the call said the teacher should take the girl to social services office immediately, which she did. When they arrived, they were immediately told to return to school and someone would come out to see them the following week. The teacher was furious about the additional stress under which the girl had been placed, especially as the delay would stretch over a weekend. The social worker who became involved in the case appeared to doubt that such information would ever be given out,

