

Child Protection: are we working together to safeguard children?

Multi-agency safeguarding needs to be strengthened to protect children from abuse and neglect. The NSPCC has been working with [the children and young people's health policy influencing group](#) to call for child safeguarding to be prioritised in the Health and Care Bill.

Children's experiences of physical abuse and neglect

In 2020, six-year-old Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and 16-month-old Star Hobson suffered prolonged physical abuse and neglect, before being killed by the very people who were supposed to be keeping them safe. Sadly, Arthur and Star's deaths were not isolated cases, evidence shows that:

- There were **more than 28,000 offences of cruelty to children** recorded by police in England and Wales in 2020-21 – **an increase of 22%** offences since 2019/20¹.
- A total of **206 children died due to abuse or neglect** in England between 1 January and 31 December 2020².
- A further **267 children were seriously harmed** in England due to abuse or neglect. Serious harm involves the "ill treatment or the impairment of the health or development of a child"³.

Physical abuse is defined as deliberately hurting a child and causing physical harm⁴. It can result in fractures, broken bones and internal injuries. 16-month-old Star Hobson died due to internal bleeding, she had a fractured leg, ribs and skull⁵.

Neglect is the ongoing failure to meet a child's basic needs. A child might be left hungry or dirty, without proper clothing, shelter, supervision or health care. Six-year-old Arthur Labinjo-Hughes was seriously neglected. He was isolated, left without food or water, and slept on the floor without a mattress⁶.

Figures from the NSPCC Helpline and the NSPCC's Childline in 2020-21

The NSPCC Helpline supports adults who are concerned about a child, providing expert advice and making referrals to statutory partners such as children's social care. The NSPCC also runs Childline which provides counselling support to children facing problems or dangers.

Physical abuse

- In 2020-21 the NSPCC helpline handled over 12,600 child welfare contacts where the main concern was physical abuse, an 18% increase from 2019-20.
- As a result of these contacts, the NSPCC referred over 9,500 children to agencies.
- The NSPCC's Childline delivered over 5,200 counselling sessions to children and young people whose main concern was physical abuse.

Neglect

- In 2020-21 the NSPCC helpline handled over 12,800 child welfare contacts where the main concern was neglect, a 15% increase from the previous year.
- As a result of these contacts, the NSPCC referred over 10,800 children to agencies.
- The NSPCC's Childline delivered almost 500 counselling sessions to children and young people whose main concern was neglect.

¹ Office for National Statistics (2021) [Crime in England and Wales: Appendix tables](#), year ending Sept 2021, table A4

² The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's (2020) [annual report 2020](#)

³ Children Act (1989), Section 31

⁴ HM Government (2018) [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#)

⁵ NSPCC (2021) [Protecting children from physical abuse](#)

⁶ NSPCC (2021) [Neglect is also child abuse: know all about it](#)

The youngest children are the most vulnerable to abuse and neglect, this can cause lasting harm to a child's health and wellbeing. As babies and young children are less able to communicate their needs and to seek help, it is crucial that statutory partners work together effectively to keep them safe.

- The NSPCC Helpline contacted agencies on average 25 times a day to investigate physical abuse and neglect concerns about a child aged five and under, totalling more than 9,400 young children (2020-21).
- In total nearly half of all NSPCC referrals to agencies, where the main concern was physical abuse or neglect, were made about children aged five and under (2020-21).
- The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel highlighted that 35% of cases where a child died or was seriously harmed due to abuse or neglect involved babies aged under one (2020).⁷

Quotes from the NSPCC Helpline and the NSPCC's Childline in 2020-21

A grandparent contacting the NSPCC Helpline: "I am worried about my grandchildren when they are with their mother's new partner. The children are 4, 5 and 7 years old. They have confided in me that their mother's boyfriend physically punishes them. The youngest described an incident where he was assaulted by the mother's boyfriend in front of her because he had done something to upset her. He told me he was in so much pain and was very scared. All of the boys have told me they do not like to be left alone with their mother's boyfriend because they are scared of what he will do to them as he regularly threatens them."

A boy aged 9 contacting the NSPCC's Childline: "My mum and dad hit me and my younger brother today. Since lockdown my mum and dad have been getting angry with each other and then they end up hitting us. They have punched and hit us on our legs, arms and sometimes our faces. I have got some bruises and marks. It hardly ever happened before lockdown. Nobody else knows about it and my parents have threatened that things will get worse if we tell anyone. I am finding it really hard."

The evolution of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements

In response to young Arthur Labinjo-Hughes' death, the Government highlighted the importance of effective multi-agency working. The Education Secretary said that although improvements had been made to strengthen multi-agency working "the question now is whether that is enough"⁸. Multi-agency safeguarding arrangements have evolved as follows:

1999: Working Together to Safeguard Children was published as statutory guidance. It was revised in 2006 following Lord Laming's inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié⁹ and in 2013 following the Munro Review¹⁰. Updated versions followed in 2015 and 2018.

2004: The Children Act required every local authority to establish a local safeguarding children board (LSCB) to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in the local area.

2009: The Laming Review¹¹ following the death of one-year-old Peter Connelly ('Baby P') made further recommendations to improve multi-agency working.

2017: The Children and Social Work Act, informed by the Wood Review¹², amended the Children Act (2004). It abolished LCSBs and replaced them with multi-agency safeguarding partnerships. These partnerships placed the first shared and equal responsibility for safeguarding children on Clinical Commissioning Groups, the police and local authorities.

⁷ The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's (2020) [annual report 2020](#)

⁸ Nadhim Zahawi, Secretary of State for Education, 6 December 2021 [Ministerial statement: Arthur Labinjo-Hughes](#)

⁹ Lord Laming (2003) [The Victoria Climbié Inquiry](#)

¹⁰ Eileen Munro (2011) [The Munro Review of child protection: a child-centred system](#)

¹¹ Lord Laming (2009) [The protection of children in England: a progress report](#)

¹² Alan Wood (2006) [Wood Review of Local Safeguarding Children Boards](#)

Why is multi-agency working important for children and families?

Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018)¹³ states that families should receive co-ordinated services that provide the right help at the right time. However, further work is needed to make this a reality as many services remain fragmented and they risk families disengaging from support. Safeguarding partners have an important role to play in providing integrated support across health, police, social care, education, and other relevant services.

A family with multiple needs may require support from multiple different professionals. If this is not properly coordinated it can be overwhelming for the family, particularly if they have faced trauma, abuse, or marginalisation. They may have to repeat their concerns multiple times and could receive conflicting messages that create distrust. This risks the family disengaging and dropping out of support or avoiding seeking support until problems reach crisis point.

There can be strict criteria for services, as each service has its own priorities and own budget to protect. Families can fall through the gaps if they are referred from one service to another, but do not meet the threshold for support. That is why different services supporting families need to work together to put children at the heart of their plans, ensuring that they can access appropriate and timely support, rather than batting them from service to service.

Challenges to multi-agency working to safeguard children

Multi-agency safeguarding partnerships act as the strategic leadership group responsible for ensuring all relevant agencies in the area are held accountable for their safeguarding duties, under section 11 of the Children Act (2004). Multi-agency working is vital to protecting children from harm, yet it continues to be a common area for improvement in reviews of serious child safeguarding incidents. Various recent reports from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, the Department for Education, the Children's Commissioner and Sir Alan Wood highlight where improvements should be made:

1. **Strong leadership** Multi-agency safeguarding partners should be represented by an individual who has the authority to make and implement decisions on policy, resourcing, and practice matters. Otherwise, it creates problems when agreeing data and information sharing protocols or joint funding arrangements. This role should only be delegated to someone with sufficient seniority and there should be a clear channel of accountability
2. **Effective scrutiny:** All safeguarding partnerships are subject to independent scrutiny, but there is no national quality assurance mechanism to ensure this is effective. There should be a national benchmark with which to judge what effective independent scrutiny looks like: objective, constructive, critical, and driving continuous improvement.
3. **Joint funding:** Funding of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements should be shared by the NHS, the police and local authorities in an equitable and proportionate manner. Further guidance from central government is needed to resolve funding disagreements through a clear escalation process and joint-departmental funding of safeguarding partnerships should also be considered.¹⁴
4. **Data and information sharing:** Many professionals, particularly in health, lack clarity over what personal safeguarding information can be shared, and with who¹⁵. There are often delays in access to information from other agencies.¹⁶ The Government must support agencies to address barriers to information sharing, so that thresholds for when to share information are consistently understood and applied.^{17, 18}

¹³ HM Government (2018) [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#)

¹⁴ Alan Wood (2021) [Wood Review of multi-agency safeguarding arrangements](#)

¹⁵ Department for Education (2021) [Multi-agency reform: Key behavioural drivers and barriers summary report](#)

¹⁶ Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2021) [Annual review of Local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews and rapid reviews](#)

¹⁷ The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2020) [The Child Safeguarding Annual Report 2020](#)

¹⁸ House of Lords Public Services Committee (2021) [Children in crisis: the role of public services in overcoming child vulnerability](#)

5. **Common frameworks:** Local safeguarding partnerships should have a common set of outcomes which they progress and monitor collaboratively.¹⁹ Joint thresholds are needed to recognise the need for support, for example evidence-based risk tools and a common framework of what constitutes neglect across different agencies.²⁰

The impact of Health and Care Bill proposals on safeguarding children

Health professionals such as GPs, nurses, and health visitors are in a prime position to recognise and report child safeguarding concerns. During medical examinations they may identify signs of physical or sexual abuse and missed medical appointments can also indicate neglect. This is particularly important for the youngest children who are at higher risk of abuse and may see few other professionals besides health before they start school.

Health is a lead partner in local multi-agency safeguarding partnerships, together with the police and local authorities. The Health and Care Bill proposes a restructure of local healthcare systems that will abolish Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCG), transferring legal responsibility for safeguarding children to newly established Integrated Care Boards (ICB). ICBs will become responsible for the provision of effective clinical, professional and strategic leadership on safeguarding children, engaging all relevant health agencies within the local area.

This restructure has the potential to destabilise relatively new multi-agency safeguarding partnerships, by disrupting existing professional relationships and causing a loss of safeguarding experience. ICBs will be responsible for large geographical areas, commissioning many services used by children. The transition of safeguarding responsibilities must therefore be carefully managed to ensure that it addresses existing challenges relating to leadership and accountability for safeguarding children.

Recommendations to government

Effective multi-agency working is vital to keeping children safe from harm. To strengthen the child protection safety net the Government should:

1. Send a clear message to new Integrated Care Boards that their legal duty to safeguard children is a top priority. The Health and Care Bill should ensure that sufficient support is put in place to strengthen health's leading role in multi-agency safeguarding partnerships.
2. Take a robust legislative approach to addressing the existing challenges to multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. There should be swift cross-departmental action following the national review into the deaths of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson, as well as the Independent Review of Children's Social Care which will examine multi-agency working.
3. Invest in the services responsible for safeguarding children. The Government should address the funding shortfall in children's services and the national shortage of 5,000 health visitors who are responsible for safeguarding the youngest children.

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¹⁹ The Children's Commissioner (2022) [Children's social care - putting children's voices at the heart of reform](#)

²⁰ The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2020) [The Child Safeguarding Annual Report 2020](#)