

The Southend, Essex and Thurrock Child Protection Procedures

The Children Act 1989 provides the legal framework for defining the situations in which local authorities have a duty to make enquiries about what, if any, action they should take to safeguard or promote the welfare of a child. There is also national guidance in the format of "Working Together" which was reviewed and reissued in 2011 and gives detailed processes as to the investigation of child abuse. It is anticipated that new guidance in the format of a new version of "Working Together" will be issued very shortly. On a local level, every area has to be part of a Local Safeguarding Children Board who must issue local guidance on child protection. Thurrock is party to the Southend, Essex and Thurrock Child Protection Procedures ("SET" procedures).

The SET procedures were reviewed and re-written in 2010 by officers of the three authorities. This is an onerous task of great responsibility. The procedures are convenient for all those in the police service and health services which cover the three authorities but their production is a costly drain on staff time. There is a possibility that the Eastern Region Safeguarding Project (a consortium of all the local authorities) may consider commissioning an external agency to review and rewrite the local safeguarding procedures for the relevant local authorities within the Eastern Safeguarding Region.

Working Together 2010 offers the following definitions:

Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children is defined as:

- Protecting children from maltreatment
- Preventing impairment of children's' health or development
- Ensuring that children are growing up in circumstances consistent with the provision of safe and effective care
- Undertaking that role so as to enable those children to have optimum life chances and to enter adulthood successfully

The SET Procedures define the following forms of child abuse

- Physical abuse which may involve hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning or scalding, drowning, suffocating or otherwise causing physical harm to a child and it may be caused by an adult fabricating symptoms or inducing illness in a child
- Emotional abuse which is the persistent emotional ill treatment of a child which causes severe and persistent effects on the child's emotional development. This may involve conveying to children that they are worthless or unloved, humiliating the child, imposing developmentally inappropriate expectations, causing children to feel frightened or in danger (e.g. witnessing domestic abuse), or the exploitation or corruption of children

- Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, which can include non-contact activities such as provoking inappropriate behaviour or forms of internet abuse such as viewing abusive images or being party to their production
- Neglect involves the persistent failure to meet a child's basic needs so that their health and development is likely to be seriously impaired. This may involve a lack of food, clothing or shelter, lack of protection from physical or emotional harm, inadequate supervision, lack of medical care and/or failure to meet educational needs.

When a child or children are drawn to the attention of the Local Authority because it is believed that they have been the subjects of significant harm, the Local Authority must exercise Section 47 of the 1989 Children Act which states that if a local authority has “‘reasonable cause to **suspect** that a child who lives or is found in their area is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm’ the authority shall make, or cause to be made, such enquiries as they consider necessary to enable them to decide whether they should take any action to safeguard or promote the child’s welfare.”

In practice this means that a plan of action is initiated whereby a strategy meeting of all relevant professionals decide how the matter will be investigated and the investigation is then planned. It may be undertaken by the Local Authority social workers as the single agency or it may be a joint investigation with the police. Depending on what is found, medical examinations of the children may be required. The law requires that children are interviewed away from the alleged perpetrator of the abuse and parents are asked to give their consent of this process. However, their views may be over-ridden if they do not cooperate and the police may exercise their power to arrest if there is a suspicion that a crime has been committed.

In general, children are much more at risk of abuse within their own families than from abusers outside the home and child protection investigations reflect this, being mainly concerned with abuse by parents and other family members. However, some investigations are undertaken when the abuser is outside the family or even a member of the child care workforce.

These are described as cases of organised abuse, defined in the SET procedures as circumstances which may involve a number of abusers and/or a number of children. In these circumstances, it may be that abusers have gained access to their victims by work or by volunteering in leisure or welfare activities.

What is well known to social workers and police is that some children are much more at risk than others. Additional vulnerability may be because the child is unprotected and available to abusers or is threatened and exploited as to seeking help by disclosing the abuse. Thus, SET procedures give specific guidance on the groups of children such as those seen begging, those where there are particular beliefs that they may be possessed by spirits, victims of

trafficking, children who are disabled, victims of female genital mutilation, forced marriage, children who are in care and more generally, those children who are moved around different areas or whose parents fail to engage in services.

Where possible, the work undertaken after a child protection investigation is that changes are made to improve the protection of the child by means of the parents and other family members cooperating with professionals. At the other extreme, cases may be so serious as to require immediate care proceedings. Mid-way, there are children whose parents need the Council and other professionals to use the authority of a child protection plan in order for changes to be made.

Where there is concern that a child will continue to be at risk, has already suffered ill treatment and will continue to be at risk of significant harm an interagency meeting of all the professionals involved will discuss with the parents that a plan is drawn up whereby an experienced social worker and other identified professionals will work together to achieve some time limited objectives. These should concentrate on ensuring the future safety and wellbeing of the child, should be regularly monitored and should be accompanied by a contingency plan as to what will be the consequences for the family if progress is not achieved.