

6. Creating a safe environment and culture for children and young people in the school - it is clear that the cultural focus of the school was on learning and attainment. The school's development plans demonstrate ambitions to provide an effective learning experience for pupils and an impetus towards continual improvement. Objective data on pupil attainment and evaluation of development plans indicates that in terms of learning the ambitions were being achieved. This focus on learning and attainment was not matched by a culture of safeguarding. The process of reporting and acting on concerns was positively hindered by a management style that discouraged comment and open communication. The clear lesson emerging from this review is that it is not sufficient for a school to have a culture that focuses only on attainment. A school culture needs to recognise that if children are to achieve their potential they must first be assured of a safe environment, in which any risks that they may face will be given full and open consideration by staff at all levels in the organisation.

Details have been changed to protect the identity and privacy of family members and professionals involved in this case.

Keeping Children and Young People Safe from Harm, Abuse and Neglect



Highlighting Lessons
from Serious Case Review

National

Date of Review: January 2012
Local Authority: North Somerset
Case involving: pupils in a first school

Keeping Children and Young People Safe from Harm, Abuse and Neglect

Summary

The sexual abuse of children took place in a first school over a number of years prior to disclosure by a child in 2010. The perpetrator of the abuse was a male classroom teacher who had taught at the school for 15 years. The abuse came to light when one child made a disclosure to her mother. Following this disclosure a number of photos and videos were found on the teacher's computer and other digital devices. The images appeared to have been taken at school and showed the teacher abusing other children.

5 children were identified in the photos and videos, but not all of these subsequently disclosed abuse when interviewed by the police. All of the children in the images were identified and became subject of the charges in Crown Court. During the investigation a further group of children were also identified. There was a total of 20 pupils who were witnesses to, or possible victims of abuse by the teacher.

At a court hearing in 2011 the teacher pleaded guilty to 36 sexual offences, including 22 counts of sexually assaulting a child under 13 and eight counts of sexual assault by penetration of a child under 13.

The teacher also admitted one count of attempted rape, one charge of voyeurism, one charge of causing or inciting a child under 14 to commit sexual activity and two charges of possessing indecent images of children. It was stated in court that, when the police arrested him, they discovered about 30,500 indecent photographs and 720 indecent movies in his possession. Most of these had been downloaded from the internet. It was noted that the youngest victim was aged six. There is no evidence that photos taken at the school were uploaded to the internet. The teacher was summarily dismissed from his teaching post and following a further court appearance later in 2011 was given an indeterminate prison sentence for public protection, having pleaded guilty.

Lessons learned & implications for practice/operation

- 1. Historical Concerns** - there is a substantial body of evidence that points to the fact that the concerns about the behaviour, teaching practice and relationships of the teacher were not appropriately dealt with. The following lessons arise from this:
 - It is essential for schools to keep accurate records of all incidents and concerns arising in connection with members of staff in order that historical patterns can be detected.
 - While it is important to protect staff against malicious allegations, all concerns and complaints need to be treated with respectful uncertainty, and all evidence carefully recorded.
 - Child protection training for school staff should aim to raise awareness of grooming behaviour and ensure that external advice is sought in any case causing concern.
- 2. Handling of complaints, disciplinary, and child protection matters** - there is evidence that staff were unaware of the procedures to be followed in the case of complaints and child protection concerns. When complaints were made to management they were not appropriately handled and disciplinary procedures were not followed. There was a failure to seek external advice. External scrutiny of the school was ineffective in identifying potential risks to the children. The following lessons have emerged:
 - The quality of leadership of the school is of fundamental importance and there needs to be a process to assess and develop school leaders.
 - Judgements about the quality of leadership are dependent on effective external scrutiny, which was lacking in this case, this may have led to a false sense of security in parents and external agencies. Agencies providing external scrutiny must make explicit the limitations of that scrutiny and stress the importance of parents and others acting on concerns that they may have.
 - The failure by staff to instigate or pursue complaints, while understandable in terms of management responses to earlier complaints, indicates poor awareness of, and training in child protection.

- As a consequence of this, staff were unaware of how complaints could be pursued externally. Staff and parents must be made aware of channels for pursuing complaints when they are unsatisfied by any internal resolution of a complaint.
 - The failure to facilitate expressions of concerns by children may have been significant in this case. All schools should have access to and be encouraged to use skilled external facilitators who, in the event of serious complaints, can help children express their views.
- 3. Employment practice in the school and the selection of prospective teachers** - it is clear that appropriate employment practices were not fully adhered to during the recruitment of the teacher. However it must be acknowledged that even if recruitment practices had been closely followed, it is possible that the teacher would still have been appointed. It is therefore important to consider the use of more rigorous recruitment processes, such as value-based interviewing, when recruiting staff to work with children.
 - 4. The use of technology in schools** - it is apparent that the school policies on the use of computers, mobile phones and cameras, which the school had developed, were neither adequate nor appropriately disseminated to staff in the school. However it is also clear that the existence of policies will not necessarily deter a member of staff intent on misusing technology. The key lesson to emerge in respect of the use of technology is that there can be no substitute for a strongly established culture of safeguarding within schools, which gives primacy to ensuring the safety of children and encourages staff to challenge apparent misconduct.
 - 5. Child protection training for staff and governors** - the review has shown that staff and governors in the school had accessed child protection training, but raised concerns about the effectiveness of this training. The review identifies the potential significance of the role of the designated teacher for child protection, but acknowledges that this did not operate effectively in the school. The lessons arising from this are that it is not sufficient to simply provide child protection training. It is important to monitor the take-up and impact of the training and also to monitor the work of the designated teacher for child protection within the school.