



# **Children's MARS Policy and Procedure**

## **Complex and Organised Child Abuse**

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## **Introduction**

Complex and organised child abuse may be defined as abuse involving one or more abusers and any number of related or non-related abused children. This may take place in any setting. The adults concerned may be acting together to abuse children, in isolation or may be using an institutional framework or position of authority such as a teacher, coach, faith group leader or be in a celebrity position to access and recruit children for abuse.

Such abuse can occur both as part of a network of abuse across a family or community and within institutions such as residential settings, boarding schools, in day care and in other provisions such as youth services, sports clubs, faith groups and voluntary groups. There may also be cases of children being abused via the use of electronic devices, such as mobile phones, computers, games consoles etc which all access the internet and in particular social networking websites

## **Investigation**

Each investigation of complex and organised abuse will be different, according to the characteristics of each situation and the scale and complexity of the investigation. All investigations will require thorough planning, collaborative inter-agency working and attention to the needs of the child victims involved.

The investigation of complex abuse requires specialist skills from both police and Children's Services staff who may involve dedicated teams of professionals and give consideration to the needs of the victims. The consequent legal proceedings may add to the timescales of such an investigation.

Some investigations become extremely complex because of the number of places and people involved, and the timescale over which abuse is alleged to have occurred. In these circumstances a specialist Investigation Management Group and a Strategic Management Group may be set up.

The complexity is heightened where, as in historical cases, the alleged victims are no longer living in the setting where the incidents occurred or where the alleged perpetrators are no longer linked to the setting or employment role. This will need to be taken into consideration when working with a child or adult victim who was a child at the time of the alleged abuse. When the victim is vulnerable and unable to provide a full statement, careful consideration should be given about how to proceed to ensure that other children or adults, who may be in contact with the alleged perpetrator, are protected. See section below on historical abuse for more information.

A senior police officer may convene a Gold Group if a particular investigation merits senior oversight from a police perspective. Police may invite senior members of staff from all agencies, so that information can be shared and a strategy agreed. It is not the remit of the Gold Group to direct investigations. Minutes should be produced for the Gold Group meetings which may be revealed to the prosecution should criminal proceedings be undertaken.

Consideration should be given to informing the chair of the Children's MARS Board where specific complexities and resource implications may need to be considered quickly.

The confidentiality of the information relevant to any section 47 enquiry and criminal investigation must be strictly maintained by those involved and must not be disclosed to others, including others within their own agency, unless absolutely necessary.

## **The child**

The single and most important consideration is the safety and wellbeing of the child/children.

In reconciling the difference between the standard of evidence required for child protection purposes and the standard required for criminal proceedings, emphasis must be given to the protection of the child/children as the prime consideration.

The investigation and enquiries must also address the racial, religious, cultural, language, sexual orientation and gender needs of the child/children, together with any special needs arising from illness or disability.

A victim support strategy and protocol should be established at the outset. Support will be required in pre-trial, trial and post-trial periods if the case proceeds to court. Minimum periods for contact should be established. It is clear from experience in research about complex investigations that many victims and families feel strongly that it is important that they remain in contact with the same staff throughout the investigative process.

## **Referral**

When receiving information or a referral, which may indicate complex and organised abuse, the recipient should immediately refer the matter to the police and the service manager for the Children's Services Single Point of Contact or the Integrated Multi Agency Partnership. Where appropriate the Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) should be informed. The LADO will take action if an allegation meets the scope of the Children's MARS policy and procedure for managing allegations against people who work with children and can provide advice and guidance to people who are unclear about how to proceed.

For further information, see the [Children's MARS policy and procedure for managing allegations against people who work with children](#).

## **Historical abuse**

Organisational responses to allegations made by an adult of abuse experienced as a child must be of the same high standard as a response to current abuse because:

- There is a significant likelihood that a person who abused a child/children in the past will have continued and may still be doing so

- Criminal prosecutions will still take place despite the fact that the allegations are historical in nature and may have taken place many years ago
- Whilst an adult service user should be asked whether they want a police investigation, it should be made clear that dependent upon the nature of the information provided, the information may need to be shared with the police if it will help to protect children and/or adults with care and support needs. Adult service users with care and support needs will be appropriately supported by specialist teams
- Consideration must be given to the therapeutic needs of the adult and reassurance given that, even without their direct involvement all reasonable efforts will be made to investigate what has been reported

## Strategy discussion

A strategy discussion should be arranged to take place as a matter of urgency to assess the need for future action to be taken and, in particular consider the safety of the child/children and whether a criminal investigation should take place.

This will be completed in accordance with the [Children's MARS policy and procedures for Assessing Need and Providing Help](#).

In relation to complex and organised abuse the following additional requirements will be considered.

In these circumstances, the strategy discussion will be chaired by a service manager or more senior manager from Children's Services with senior police representation and should take place within **one** working day of the receipt of the referral, or in line with the child/children's best interests. The strategy discussion will be formally recorded.

The nominated senior staff within Children's Services and the police should attend the meeting. The meeting will involve senior staff from health, education and other agencies as required and, where necessary, must ensure coordination across local authority boundaries.

The strategy discussion must:

- Include an assessment of the information known to date including:
  - the children named
  - the children who may be in current contact with possible abusers
  - the children who were, but no longer are, in contact with possible abusers
  - possible victims who are now adults
- Decide what further information is required at this stage
- Make arrangements to gather the required information
- Establish if / to what extent complex abuse has been uncovered
- Undertake an initial mapping exercise to determine the scale of the investigation and possible individuals implicated as well as prepare
  - witnesses to be interviewed prior to the interviews of children
  - multiple and simultaneous interviews

- Consider a plan including resource implications, for investigation to be presented to the management and resources strategy group
- Consider any immediate protective action required

A strategic decision will need to be made by senior managers from the agencies involved as to whether the social work input into the enquiries/investigation can be managed in the conventional way or whether a specialist approach is required. For example, from a dedicated team. Any relevant information will feed into the Gold Group for their consideration.

This will usually depend on the number, geographical spread and age range of potential interviewees, as well as whether those implicated are foster carers or employees of any agency involved. If the alleged perpetrator is in a position of trust, either in a paid, or unpaid capacity the North Lincolnshire Safeguarding Adult's Board People in a Position of Trust Policy must be considered. The policy can be found on the [Safeguarding Adult's Board website](#).

Where the strategy discussion confirms that the investigation will relate to complex and organised abuse, it will appoint a multi-agency Strategic Management Group.

Where a member of staff of any agency is implicated in the investigation, their line manager must not be a member of the Strategic Management Group.

## **The Strategic Management Group**

The Strategic Management Group will be chaired by a senior officer in Children's Service and will:

- oversee the mapping process started by the strategy discussion
- establish ownership of the strategic lead in the investigation
- decide the terms of reference and accountability for the investigating team, including the parameters and timescales of their enquiries/investigation
- bring together a team of people with the necessary training, expertise and objectivity to manage and conduct the criminal investigation and/or section 47 enquiry on a day to day basis. NB: Line managers or colleagues of any person implicated in the investigation must not be involved and the involvement of any person from the work place under investigation must be considered with particular care
- in cases of greater scale and complexity, appoint an Investigation Management Group
- ensure that appropriate resources are deployed to the investigation including access to legal and other specialist advice, resources and information
- ensure that appropriate resources are available to meet the needs of the children and families or adult survivors, including any specific health issues arising from the abuse;
- ensure the investigating team are themselves supported with personal counselling if necessary and that issues of staff safety are addressed
- ensure that suitable accommodation and administrative support are available for the investigation
- ensure that an appropriate venue is available for interviews and the interviews are conducted in accordance with Achieving Best Evidence Guidance

- liaise as necessary with the Crown Prosecution Service at an early stage before arranging services for a child in need of counselling or therapeutic help so that the help can be given in a way which is consistent with the conduct of the criminal investigation
- agree a communications strategy including the handling of political and media issues, and communication as necessary with the Regulatory Authority
- ensure that records are kept safely and securely stored and a high level of confidentiality maintained at all times
- hold regular strategic meetings and reviews, which must be recorded, to consider progress, including the effectiveness of the joint working, the need for additional resources and next steps

## **The Investigation Management Group**

For cases of considerable complexity and scale, an Investigation Management Group (IMG) will be appointed.

Membership of this group should include representatives from Children's Services, the police, designated health professionals and the local authority's legal services, with other agencies being invited to participate as appropriate.

The tasks and functions of the group will be subject to the terms of reference agreed by the Strategic Management Group (SMG), and will include the following:

- To provide a forum where professionals can meet, exchange information and discuss the implementation of the agreed investigation strategy
- To ensure a consistent strategy for interviewing victims within and outside the council's area
- To keep the SMG informed of resources and any shortfalls
- To ensure a consistent and appropriate inter-agency approach to support victims and their families
- To co-ordinate the inter-agency response to families and provide consistent information
- To ensure information is shared appropriately with other agencies not represented on the SMG or the IMG
- To ensure clarity of roles and responsibilities for staff involved in the investigation. Investigators will have full access to all records and key information
- To ensure that relevant intelligence is passed between agencies and to the police Major Incident Room (MIR)

## **Enquiry investigating team**

It is probable that an investigation will identify individuals who are suspected abusers but against whom prosecutions are not brought. If a suspected abuser is working with children in a childcare position, or in the education service, evidence and information should be shared to support disciplinary proceedings and to enable, where appropriate, the referral of suspected abusers to the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) and the relevant regulatory bodies.

At the conclusion of the enquiry/investigation, the SMG must evaluate the investigation, identify the lessons learned and prepare an overview report with recommendations and an action plan for the Children's MARS Board, highlighting any practices, procedures or policies which may need further attention and require either inter-agency or individual agency action plans.