

APPENDIX 4

Churches' Child Protection Advisory Service Evidence to the Statutory Inquiry in the death of Victoria Climbié



CCPAS Response to issues raised in Seminar Topics

There are issues which we would like to raise which don't naturally fall within the remit of the seminar topics and these we have addressed elsewhere. However, some of the questions are pertinent to CCPAS's goals and these are commented upon in more detail below.

As a general point there are a number of references in the Invitation for Submissions to "the wider community", "the community at large", "society", "the general public" and "individual citizens". We would like to see a greater acknowledgement of the important role of voluntary agencies -and churches in particular- in the protection of children. We believe that Part One of the Inquiry demonstrated very clearly that there is a great deal more work to be done in persuading churches of the importance of child protection and in strengthening their links with statutory child protection agencies.

1. Discovery and Inclusion

- (ii) How can the wider community be encouraged to participate in this process?

Churches across the country are in contact with large numbers of children and families. They are sometimes in contact with vulnerable people who may not be known to the statutory agencies. Some churches and Christian agencies work with asylum seekers and refugees. The black majority churches play a particularly central role in the lives of many people of African Caribbean origin. All these churches and groups should be encouraged to take the protection of children seriously and everything possible should be done in order to develop and maintain positive, open and confiding relationships between them and the statutory child protection agencies.

2. Identification

- (ii) How can the protective circle for children be extended so that the wider community is fully aware of child protection issues and the role that individual citizens can play in protecting children?

Churches can and should play a part in raising awareness of child protection both within their congregations and in society at large. They can do this by modeling positive relationships within their community, by supporting those who are parents and by teaching about child welfare and children's needs. The ethical teaching of the Christian church is a powerful incentive to individual citizens to take their social responsibilities seriously. For example, Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan urges compassion for those in need (especially when they are different from ourselves) and argues against walking by on the other side.

3. Determining Requirements

- (ii) Are changes needed to current training programmes? If so, which training programmes and for which groups of staff?

Training is a crucial issue in child protection and we make some recommendations about training elsewhere. So far as churches are concerned we believe that those in pastoral leadership and those with particular responsibilities for children's work should be offered child protection training. There are particular advantages in having some foundation training alongside people from other agencies (such as the training provided by ACPCs) as this also builds up relationships within the local child protection network and fosters a partnership ethos.

- (iii) How can agencies best organize themselves and the way in which they handle their initial responses to concerns about children, regardless of whether those concerns are raised by another professional agency or a member of the public?

The initial response to a referral about a vulnerable child is extremely important as it is likely to have a great influence on the future trajectory of the case and its final outcome. Decisions made at the point of referral about the relative urgency of the

concerns expressed will determine the timescale of the response and this is critical where a child's safety may be at risk. In other situations what may appear initially to be a very minor concern may later be revealed as a significant child protection matter.

Feedback we receive from churches indicates that, when they do make a referral about a child in need, they would like to be kept informed of the outcome and would like, where possible, to be involved in any plan of intervention to meet identified needs.

Feedback from our training courses indicates that there is a more general issue about sharing concerns about a child in the absence of a precipitating incident or crisis (a child who may be experiencing chronic neglect for example). Health Visitors and Education professionals report that they have been instructed not to share information about children and families with other agencies, unless the matter is clearly defined as "child protection". Their point is, at this early stage, in the absence of any particular incident or injury (ie most neglect and emotional harm cases), they are not in a position to know whether this is a child protection matter or not. It is precisely because they are worried about possible neglect that they are wanting to refer the child/children to Social Services and to initiate some form of inter-agency sharing of information and concerns.

The usual route for referral into the child protection system triggers a set of procedures (initial enquiries, strategy discussion, Section 47 visits/interviews) which are incident-based. As almost all families where there are serious deficits in child care have support services already in place, the method of fulfilling the Local Authority's obligations under Section 47 of the Children Act must be different. An inter agency meeting, perhaps undertaken as a Strategy Discussion, could commission the core assessment required to decide *whether* the children are at risk of significant harm from the ongoing oversight of aspects of care within the family.

There would appear to be a conflict here- in the perceptions of professional child care workers- between the requirements of new human rights and data protection legislation on the one hand and effective inter-agency working on the other. In our opinion the needs and rights of children have to be given priority and professionals and others should be encouraged and empowered to share their

concerns (whether for children in need or for children at risk of harm) at the earliest possible opportunity in some form of inter-agency meeting.

4. and 5. Service Provision and Monitoring

The CCPAS view is that there is a legal and procedural framework, spelt out in successive Government guidance, which, if properly resourced and implemented, has the potential to prevent a large proportion of child abuse and neglect. The sad fact that not all child abuse is preventable should not deter us from making every effort to safeguard children from harm and to promote their welfare. So far as Christian churches are concerned their role and responsibility in relation to child protection is a supportive one. They occupy an intermediate position between the statutory authorities and the individual citizen and their responsibility is primarily to pass on any child protection concerns they may have to the appropriate investigating authorities. They should consider themselves to be part of the local child protection network and should develop close links with the relevant statutory authorities.

We have had experience of Working Together at the local level which has been very effective in safeguarding children from harm. There are some excellent examples of agencies, both statutory and voluntary, working together in creative partnerships for the sake of children. It would be entirely regrettable, in our view, if this partnership working which has taken so long to build up were to be jeopardized by further radical changes in the way services are organized and delivered. There is significant evidence that organizational change can itself be hazardous for vulnerable children as concerned adults may find it more difficult to know how, and with whom, to share their concerns. We encourage churches to build up links with child protection agencies within their localities as we are convinced that these local networks, when they are working effectively, have a vital part to play in protecting children.