

Audit of cases where children have been harmed highlights problems with sharing of information between safeguarding agencies and professionals, and examples of some areas that are overcoming these

The role of information sharing in improving child protection

SOCIAL CARE



By Jovian Smalley, engagement manager, the Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing

The Centre of Excellence for Information Sharing has been supporting the Department for Education to look in more detail at how information sharing can be used more effectively to protect vulnerable children and families, paying particular attention to the barriers to information sharing at all points of intervention – from the earliest offer of help through to child protection procedures.

To gain a better understanding of the barriers to information sharing, the centre analysed 15 serious case reviews (SCRs) that cited information sharing as a key failing, before getting the views of practitioners and managers in the field, through a questionnaire, interviews and a series of roadshows attended by 150 delegates across five regions.

Analysis of the findings identified that there are three overarching factors crucial to the successful sharing of information by early help and safeguarding partnerships – understanding vulnerability and risk, providing strategic leadership and communication, and developing professional capability.

The key messages from each are outlined below, along with examples of how solutions to these issues are being embedded in local practice across the country.

Understanding vulnerability

Throughout the work, not knowing the “bigger picture” about vulnerable children and families was cited as a reason that information was not shared.

Professionals often struggle to understand the purpose for sharing crucial pieces of

information that may help protect children and families without the full context of a family’s history.

Without this holistic view, the most appropriate early help and safeguarding interventions may not take place.

For instance, one case reviewed pointed to poor understanding of the level of vulnerability in a child attending a day nursery, leading to information not being shared between children’s services the day nursery.

Had the information been shared, serious harm to the child may have been avoided.

Avon & Somerset Constabulary is tackling the awareness barrier in Halcon ward, a troubled housing estate with the worst deprivation figures in Somerset. It partnered with Taunton borough council, and a range of voluntary and community agencies to set up the Halcon One Team project in 2013. By carefully listening to families’ needs, the partners are able to use a clearer contextual picture to share information earlier to provide a “right door, first time” response.

Responding to risk

Alongside a greater understanding of the vulnerabilities of children and families, professionals spoke of the need to be able to make better decisions about how to best respond to risk.

Risk to vulnerable children is managed most effectively when information is shared proactively.

The **Child Protection – Information Sharing project (CP-IS)** is enabling pro-active information sharing about vulnerable children to happen in partnerships across England. It enables the exchange of key child protection information and episodes of unscheduled NHS care, so that local authorities are alerted when a child in their care presents for



Workforce development could be improved to include better training on information sharing between NHS staff and child protection teams

This happens because local safeguarding partnerships are able to make informed decisions about the level of risk to vulnerable children and families, enabling agencies to join up and intervene earlier.

The work established that where partners are not empowered to share information about risk, the decision-making process is imbalanced, often being skewed towards a consideration of risk to the practitioner’s reputation with the family they are trying to protect.

unscheduled treatment. This simplifies decisions about what information to share, freeing up resources to focus on other safeguarding concerns. There are currently 29 local authorities and 21 NHS Trusts using the system, with 34,345 children’s plans, comprising of child protection, looked-after children and pre-birth, uploaded onto it.

Providing leadership

Systems leaders create the ideal conditions for information sharing through a clear strategic vision for the safeguarding partnership, cutting across traditional organisational boundaries, and supporting middle managers to drive change in early help and safeguarding practice.

Through adopting better ways of collaborating to discuss and exchange information about children and families, and stronger governance arrangements to scrutinise decisions to share information, partner agencies will develop more trusting inter- and intra-agency relationships in order to share information earlier.

However, the findings from this work have shown that poor leadership often results in a lack of appropriate governance, leading to an inability to challenge decisions and low

confidence among professionals to share information.

Norfolk Constabulary has been developing a systems leadership approach to safeguarding, which has placed information sharing at the forefront of everything they do. In 2014, the chief inspector oversaw the creation of a team of mental health nurses within the police control room. Using their previous experience in health, they looked beyond the boundaries of policing to improve collaborative safeguarding across partnerships within Norfolk. As a result, Norfolk Constabulary and its partners have been able to share information earlier and to put vulnerable people at the heart of practice.

Better communication

Professionals should also use collaborative working approaches to agree and communicate common thresholds for early

intervention and develop a shared language for information sharing, especially when sharing information about families that move between different authorities (be they council, police or health).

These approaches should be supported at a national level by simplified and co-ordinated messages about best information sharing practice.

An example of this is taking place in **Cheshire**, where partners across four local authorities are improving information sharing about vulnerable people through the implementation of their “complex dependency programme”. This programme uses sub-regional information sharing agreements and a single-view portal to remove the cross border constraints to sharing information, revolutionising the way in which services are delivered across the region to safeguard the lives of vulnerable children.

Developing capability

Professionals highlighted that workforce development could be improved to include better multi-agency induction and bespoke training on information sharing.

There was a call for ongoing opportunities for professional development and reflection in order to be able to share information confidently and challenge poor practice.

The findings from this work demonstrated that without access to regularly updated induction and training sessions, a risk-averse attitude prevails among professionals.

In early help and safeguarding partnerships, this means that agencies are unable to share information to intervene effectively in the lives of vulnerable families.

Through collaborative approaches to workforce

WHAT THE GOVERNMENT NEEDS TO DO TO IMPROVE DATA SHARING

The direct engagement with professionals highlighted the information sharing issues that exist as barriers to better safeguarding, resulting in five recommendations being made to the Department for Education:

- Whitehall departments should work with other national agencies and voluntary sector organisations to work together with other nationally based agencies and voluntary organisations to develop a cross-government understanding of the context of information sharing about vulnerable children and families
- Local early help and safeguarding partnerships should develop a strong and coherent approach to making decisions about the balance

of risk when sharing information about vulnerable children and families

- Leaders in central government, national sector organisations and local places should work in partnership to champion information sharing across partnerships
- Government departments and safeguarding partnership leaders should support improved communication and coherent messages about good information sharing practice at both national and local level
- Government departments should support local early help and safeguarding partnerships to develop their partners’ information sharing capability.

development, and stronger links with communities, partnerships can drive service transformation by understanding what information sharing practice works best locally.

This approach is currently in place in Durham through the **Family Intervention Partnership**, which delivers training to staff and managers in order to raise awareness about safeguarding being everyone’s responsibility, especially those who have first-hand interaction with vulnerable people.

Implications for practice

The findings indicate that poor information sharing cannot be diagnosed and treated as a distinct problem that lies outside of professional practice – in fact, information sharing is part of practice.

To support safeguarding agencies and practitioners to promote and deliver earlier intervention, there is a pressing

need to ensure that information sharing is seen as an integral part of professional practice.

Genuine commitment is required from multi-agency partnerships, with the support of national safeguarding bodies, to learn lessons from past failures to share information.

Pockets of skilled and reflective information sharing practice exist locally in many places.

However, this work has shown that, in order to move beyond small scale changes in response to serious incidents and ensure all partnerships are doing an excellent job of protecting vulnerable children and families, there needs to be a nationwide commitment to making information sharing everybody’s business.

Jovian Smalley has worked in the public sector for 13 years, largely in early years and family information. For the past year, he has been working with safeguarding and early help partnerships to improve information sharing practice