



Report on the Voice of the Child Project – Hearing from Children who have Experienced Neglect.

Introduction

This report was commissioned by the West Sussex Safeguarding Children Partnership in June 2019. The aim of this project was to capture the views of children that had been the subject of a child protection plan for neglect, in the three months preceding the project.

The project also aimed to gain the views of the parents or carers of the children, particularly to hear how services had been received.

The Independent Chair was clear that the Partnership needed to better evidence how they were listening to children and young people, in order to improve safeguarding practice. Due to the need to improve practice in relation to neglect, this provided an ideal opportunity to reflect on children and young people's views.

Methodology

The Independent Chair met with a group of young people who were members of the Children in Care Council, to co-produce the methodology for this review. They recommended that views be sought "face to face" and on an individual basis, rather than in a group.

Selection of cohorts

Children aged 8 years to 18 years were selected from children's services lists of children, that had been the subject of child protection plans due to neglect.

Children were selected based upon their age, gender and the area of West Sussex they lived in. Attention was given to ensuring that the children could give feedback on services across West Sussex and not in any one given area only.

Two cohorts of children were selected. The first cohort, selected in June, consisted of 35 children. In this group efforts were made not to select multiple siblings of the same family group, to avoid skewing of any feedback and ensuring that the views collected were as representative as possible.

A second cohort of 37 children who had recently come off child protection plans were identified in August 2019 to ensure an appropriate sample of children were available as part of this piece of work. Again, these were children that had come off child protection plans three months preceding the contact, or prior to June 2019. In this cohort, less importance was given to the need to interview a range of children across families, rather than sibling groups. This was largely due to the poor return on the first cohort.

For the children in each of the cohorts, emails were sent to the allocated social worker, or previous social worker where the child's case had been closed. The emails asked for clarification that:

- a) There was no reason that the child should not be included in the cohort ?
- b) The home address was the correct address for initial correspondence ?
- c) If the child had any additional communication needs?

Contacting the families

On receipt of the emails the following was sent to the families:

- A letter to the parent/carer
- An information flyer for the child

The letter to the parent indicated a specific date and time that a "step up"¹ social worker would contact them to discuss the project. The intention with this was to allow families to opt out by not responding to this call, if they did not wish to take part in the project. A copy of the letter is shown in Appendix 1.

To support the contact with the families, the social workers were provided with a prompt sheet to assist them in answering any questions the family had.

Consent

A consent form was produced for completion prior to the commence of the interview. In all but one of the interviews, these were completed by the parent. One case, a 16 year old young woman provided her own consent.

Child Interviews

All interviews were carried out by an Independent Safeguarding Consultant and a member of West Sussex Staff.

A range of prompt images were devised depicting a nurse, doctor, teacher, social worker, church and some other images for the child to choose from, for children that preferred not to complete a worksheet.

These children were offered a choice of image and asked to choose which one made things better for them, when they weren't being looked after well or didn't feel safe.

Older children were provided with a work sheet with questions:

- What did the adult do to make you feel safe and make sure you were being well looked after?
- What didn't help make you feel safer or make sure you were well looked after?
- What can we do differently to make it better for other children like you?

¹ A student social worker ending their training to be a qualified social worker

A recording format was produced for recording an interview with an older young person. This consisted of the same questions but not in a work sheet version.

Parent/Carer interviews:

Parent interviews were carried out using a prompt sheet and undertaken by two interviewers.

Parents included both parents living in the household and parents living in a different household as necessary.

They were asked:

- What worked well and how did this reduce the risk to your child?
- What didn't work as well and why?
- What could agencies do differently to improve how they support families?

Characteristics of the Cohorts

Cohort 1

35 children were selected from children's services record. Of these 11 were deemed to be unsuitable to take part in the project. Some examples of reasons included:

- Care proceedings hearing fell close to the date of interviews
- Bereavement
- Learning disabilities and very complex communication needs
- Terminal illness of a family member

Of the remaining 22 children 5 interviews were arranged. 3 of these interviews did not go ahead as the parents were not at home for the scheduled interview.

As a result of the very low numbers of children a second cohort of families were approached.

Cohort 2

A further 37 children or 24 families were approached using the same letter and telephone call arrangement. Of these families:

- 17 families did not answer the telephone at the pre arranged time
- 4 families declined
- 3 families and 1 child agreed (this child was in care)

Three interviews took place as a result of approaches made to this cohort. One family agreed for the children to be interviewed, following 4 attempts to meet with the family this was no longer pursued.

Another family said that they didn't know their child was on a plan for neglect. This child was on a plan due to neglect as a result of the risks of sexual exploitation and going missing.

Final cohort characteristics

Eight children in total were interviewed. The characteristics of these children are shown below in Fig 2.

Fig 2.

Child	Age
A	16
B	13
C	13
D	10
E	8
F	10
G	12
H	11

One child was living in a residential children's home. One child had been removed from her mother's care and was living with her father and his new partner. The remaining children were living with a parent or parents.

Two children shared information in the interviews that resulted in a referral to their social worker. One visit to a child resulted in a referral to the MASH, due to safeguarding issues. This young person later requested an opportunity to contribute to this project, which was provided.

Voices of the children

Direct quotes from children is shown in Appendix 2.

With the exception of one of the children, all of the children readily provided feedback on their experience of involvement with services. One child did not fully engage in the interview after consenting to take part. His residential worker said that his behaviour was in contrast to how he normally engaged. He did feedback however, that he didn't know that he had been on a child protection plan and had experienced multiple numbers of social worker.

What is striking is the willingness of the children that were seen, to engage. Of the 72 children originally identified, it was the parent/carers that declined to take part and not the children. This is an important consideration for future consultations with children.

From the children that were seen, perhaps the strongest messages from the children was the disruption caused by changes of social workers. One child said she had 5 social workers in 1.5 years and described how a social worker had "left us". The impact of the changes in social worker clearly left children feeling they were not able to trust individuals, feelings of being "left" and not knowing

the name of their social worker. This would have impacted on the children's willingness to confide their fears and worries with a social worker.

Children also provided an insight into how their wishes and feelings are sought. Child G shared her frustration that she was asked questions about her mother assaulting her, in front of her mother. As a result, she couldn't tell the social worker the "whole truth". This will undoubtedly have impacted on the assessment of risk in respect of Child G, as the assault was not fully understood. She also offered an insight into how difficult it is to have a conversation about sensitive issues when out in the community. She talked of being asked personal questions in McDonalds.

Another child made reference to being taken out of classes in school to attend meetings and see her social worker. The Children in Care Council in West Sussex, have previously provided a report raising these concerns and this issue was raised with the Independent Chair of the Partnership, when she met with this group. She has sought assurance that young people's views are being listened to in respect of where their reviews and meetings are held.

Lastly, Child C offered an insight into how he was asked about his home life by his social worker. He shared that he and his siblings were all seen alone, separately. He shared that he wondered what his siblings had said and as a result did not respond to the social worker as openly as he could. He reflected that if he had been seen with his siblings, they probably would have collectively told the social worker more about being left at home alone.

Multiple children in the cohort spoke of not knowing they were on a child protection plan, not understanding what their safety plan, was. Only one child in the cohort described actively taking part in safety planning by attending meetings and being supported by an advocate.

Forming trusting relationships, listening to children, understanding their lived experience and co-producing safety plans with children is fundamental to good safeguarding practice. From the feedback that these children provided it is difficult to see that communicating and working with children to keep them safe, is sufficiently embedded in social work practice in West Sussex.

Three children had a good experience of their social worker. One child spoke of the social worker "having a word" with his father, after he had repeatedly been left at home alone, caring for his younger siblings. He was then aged 9 years. A child described attributes of her "good" social worker as she "listened", allowed

CHILDREN'S FEEDBACK

"social workers could listen a bit more"

"stop the changes of social worker"

"I didn't know I was on a plan" and "I didn't know what the plan was"

It was good "just having someone to talk to" in school

Young carer service was good. "They listened, at my own pace", brought out my confidence and "got me back into education".

School was an important place for half of the cohort of children.

An advocate "helped at" case conference and core group meetings

her to say “what” she wanted “when” she wanted and “wasn’t too nosey”. Another child spoke about her father keeping her safe, by preventing her from going to her mother’s home. She said “Dad and T (step mother) did what the social worker told them”.

Four of the children, or half of the cohort, spoke of the importance of school for them. Two of the children had individual sessions school, which they valued. This was a safe place for them to share their worries and feelings. Interestingly one of the children that had these sessions shared that he was originally reluctant to go to his sessions, but after one, he valued the time.

Another of the children spoke of the impact of getting back into school. As a result, she had an opportunity to make new friends and got “out of the house”. Getting away from the family home was important for her as she was living with a parent which chronic alcohol misuse issues.

Teachers, “school helpers” and school based counsellors provided these children with a safe person to talk to, they were offered reassurance that they could share their feelings and “just having someone to talk to”.

Two children described an intervention which assisted in keeping them safe. One child spoke of group work in a Woman’s Aid centre to build the attachment and bonding between the child and her mother, after she had been in care for a while. Another child spoke very positively about the support of the Young Carers service which got her back into school with smaller classes and a more focussed approach to teaching. She is now enjoying education and is enjoying learning skills to improve her employability. The feedback from these children highlights the important role that the third sector hold in contributing to the safety and welfare of children.

A child said that having a number to call for help, would have been good. She shared that she would not call the police. It may be worth considering posting the NSPCC child line details in schools and other settings that are frequently attended by children. Finally, one child suggested that it would be helpful to have a child’s leaflet for Child Protection Case Conferences and Core Groups. This could set out who is who and what the purpose of meetings is.

Parent/carer feedback

5 Parents took part in the research. 1 of the participants was a foster carer. 2 of the parents were fathers that were caring for their children. Of the cohort only 3 parents took part that were

PARENT/CARER FEEDBACK

The social worker was
“amazing”

The social worker was “on
the ball”

“The headteacher was very
supportive”

“The social worker
changed”

I “had to repeat my story”

“the children were on a
child protection plan for
over a year”

“health professionals don’t
listen”

“Schools don’t deal with
bullying”

“90% of meetings and
visits were late”

“no one (agencies) co-
operate any more.

actually caring for their children at the time the children were on child protection plans and were perceived to be at risk.

This, coupled with the general low take up, could be indicative of the general sensitivity of this issue for parents. This will need careful consideration for any further consultations, as parental sensitivity and unwillingness to take part has been a major barrier to children taking part in this project and giving their views.

There was some very positive feedback about social workers. Workers were described as “amazing”, “listens to the children” and “on the ball”, provided “clear expectations and said it straight”. The parents echoed the views of the children in recognising the important role that schools have in supporting children. This included both teaching staff and a school nurse.

One parent referenced the use of her sister as a carer when it was assessed that her children could not safely live at home. This parent also referenced the support of a bonding group run by Woman’s Aid. Both she and her child felt that they benefitted from these sessions.

Again, there were similar themes from parents to that expressed by the children. The parents described multiple changes of social worker and a child not seeing a social worker for “4 months”. They articulated the impact of the changes of worker as having to repeat their “story” to new workers, their feeling that one worker “didn’t bother to read the notes” and persistently turned up for visits an hour early. Another parent described how most meetings and visits were late.

One parent shared that the social worker left and “didn’t say goodbye”. Another parent described struggling to communicate with the social worker due to him having a very strong accent.

One family spoke of child protection planning and described it as “drawn out” and that one (parent) “was given too many chances”. Similarly, one parent said that the child protection plan was not effective as, although there was an expectation that the parent would stop drinking, when this didn’t happen, the child protection plan was not reviewed and there were no consequences for the parent.

One family reflected that the “end of the child protection plan meant no support”. Whilst another family felt that they were being “blamed” and a view that “you aren’t a good parent”.

The parents offered feedback on other services too. There was a view that schools should be more proactively responsive to bullying.

Parents commented that “health professionals don’t listen” when they had ceased the child’s medication against the wishes of the parents.

A parent shared his frustration that agencies don’t co-operate with each other. He was referring to housing and children’s social care not communicating and working together to support his housing need.

Lastly, a parent commented that his child had been involved in a domestic abuse incident. He had heard from his ex-wife’s neighbours that this had happened. He had not received notification from the police about the incidents. Confidentiality is a complex issue for practitioners to navigate. However, it is important that we share information with children’s fathers so that they can be an active party in safeguarding their children.

Learning

It is common for a low return rates to questionnaires and feedback². Most commonly returns are approximately 15%. The parents of the 72 children that were approached resulted in only 5 parents and 8 children's contribution. This represents a participation rate of 20%.

This project resulted in a very small cohort of children and their parents taking part. However, this number is comparable to numbers of participants in national research. Recent research that has been carried out to test the experiences of children placed in secure accommodation involved 10 children.

Of those that took part in the project, only 3 of the parents were actually caring for their child/ren at the time of the child protection plan. This is indicative of how sensitive this subject area is for parents and how challenging seeking feedback is.

It is notable that, with the exception of one child, the children seen were very willing to give their insights and feedback. Where the parents decided not to participate in the project, this blocked the ability to seek feedback from many children.

It was concerning that 3 referrals were made to children's services from this group of children. These arose due to safeguarding concerns that were either observed at the interviews or shared by the children. Only one of these related to their home circumstances.

Perhaps the most important message from the children was that some didn't know that they were on children protection plans. In addition, there was little evidence that children were actively taking part in safety planning and being consulted about what might work for them to keep them safe. Two children very clearly showed that when asked, they were very capable of contributing to safety planning.

Both the children and their parents articulated the important role that schools play in supporting families and giving children the space to feel safe and share any worries they might have. Two children expressed that the support of a given teacher or counsellor helped them.

Some very positive feedback was given about some experiences of their social worker. What was clear in this project was the pivotal role a social worker holds. When the social worker worked well with the child and the family they were thought to be "amazing". However, where this didn't work well children felt let down, experiencing changes of social worker and feelings of being "left", not feeling listened to and not having someone to contact to ask for help. One child offered insight into how difficult it is to share fears and feelings when being asked questions in public places.

Equally parents felt frustrated that appointment times weren't kept to, calls were not returned, reports were not shared in advance of meetings, they felt "blamed for not being a good parent" and described having to re tell their story as the social worker hadn't read their notes.

Another source of support for children was the third sector. One child talked about the very positive impact of a local education centre and a drop-in centre. She was signposted to the Young Carers service that were instrumental in getting her "back into education", making new friends and building her confidence.

In conclusion, there was evidence of some good practice where interventions had made an impact on the experiences of children and their parents. However, there are some important messages from

² For information on common return levels to customer survey research go to <https://www.customersure.com/survey-response-rates/> -

children about how they have not been involved in safety planning and at times were not even aware that they were on child protection plans. This is a critical element of safeguarding for children and it is the responsibility of all safeguarding partners working with vulnerable children, to help them articulate their worries, empower them to take part in drawing up plans to keep them safe and ensuring that they understand safety plans.

Instability in the social worker workforce has had a great impact on both children and their parents, which has at times impacted on their confidence and trust in the lead professional responsible for their safety. Good social work should be founded upon relationship based interventions and without consistency and trust, any steps taken by children's services to safeguard children will be undermined.

Recommendations

1. Partners to ensure that the learning from the Voice of the Child project is reflected in their individual agency action plans.
2. The partnership will seek assurance that children are aware of their children protection status and are involved in drawing up safety plans. This will be will tested in the planned pilot scrutiny event.
3. The partnership to seek assurance that practice improvement work undertaken in children's services has improved the effective engagement and communication with children. Children's services to demonstrate this via ongoing audit and performance management reporting.
4. To produce a children's charter setting out the expectations of how children and young people will be involved in the child protection process.
5. Children's services to develop a range of leaflets for children and young people to help them understand the membership of and purpose of meetings.
6. Partners to advertise Child line in public settings, to offer children a neutral contact to use if they feel unsafe.
7. The Partnership to develop a flyer setting out the key messages for professionals, arising from this piece of work.

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Dated: 21.02.2020

Appendix 1 – Letter to Parents/carers

Local Safeguarding Children Board

East Wing Attic
County Hall
Chichester
West Sussex
PO19 1RG
Email: lscb@westsussex.gov.uk
Phone: 0330 222 7799



[Click **here** and type recipient's name],

I would like to invite you to take part in an important consultation. This consultation aims to capture the views of children and parents/carers about services provided where children have been on a child protection plan under the category of neglect. This work will be used to inform how we can improve safeguarding services in West Sussex.

The consultation is being carried out independently by the West Sussex Safeguarding Children Board (WSSCB). The main role of the Board is to make sure that all agencies offering services to children and families are carrying out their safeguarding duties effectively. If you would like to read more about the Board's functions please type in the pathway/link below into your search engine:

<https://www.westsussexscb.org.uk/>

The board has employed an independent person, with experience of working with children and families to talk to you. Her name is XXXXX.

The aim of the project is to capture learning from yours and your child's experience, in particular:

- What worked well and how did this reduce the risk to your child?
- What didn't work as well and why?
- What could agencies do differently to improve how they support to families where neglect is a concern?

Any other suggestions you may have to help improve services for others would be welcomed. You may want to tell us something about the way that schools, health professionals, the police or social workers worked with your family members.

We shall telephone you on **(date)** so we can talk about this further and with your agreement, arrange a time for XXXXX and a support worker to visit you. All information given will be anonymised, you will not be identified and what you say will not be shared with the agencies individually.

During this call we will also ask your permission for **(insert child's name)** to take part in this project so that we can ensure that **his/her**/their views are heard and that we capture as many views from your family as possible. The Board is particularly committed to improving how agencies work with children and young people. The

Board will therefore give a £20 gift voucher to all children who participate to thank them for their time.

If you would like to take part but would rather not meet with someone face to face you can also email your views directly to:

Lscb@westsussex.gov.uk

We will ensure that your comments and experiences are drawn together in the final report to the West Sussex Safeguarding Children Board which is due to be finished in October 2019. The report will set out the findings from all of the families that have taken part and also make recommendations on how to improve services for children, young people and their families. As stated this report will not identify you or your family.

The interviewers will ask you if you would like to receive a copy of the final report.

This is the first project of this type in West Sussex and I am excited to be able to lead this on behalf of the Board. I should be very grateful if you and your child would consider taking part in this important project.

By sparing a little time to contribute you will help us to improve the services we deliver to West Sussex families going forward.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Lesley Walker". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'L' and 'W'.

Lesley Walker

Independent Chair - West Sussex Safeguarding Children Board

cc: [Click **here** and enter "copy to" details]

Appendix 2

What did adult do to make you feel safe and make sure you were being well looked after?

My parents "stayed by me and my choices"

my parents got me out of a school that I got bullied in"

"Dad and step mother did what the social worker told them and stopped me going to the house to keep" me "safe"

"I always used to see a counsellor and she made me happy and I told my worries to her"

My "teacher in school said if I wanted to talk I could tell them"

"they (teachers) said to me if I am ok"

"group sessions with mum on Friday, we cut a piece of string to tell your worry to people" it was "good to be around other people"

"weekly meeting with school helper"

"Just having someone to talk to"

"The (social worker) having a word with my dad"

"at first I didn't really want it (1:1 session in school) but it worked after a session"

An "advocate" helped at Case Conference meetings and core group meetings and had a 1:1 prior to meetings

Young carers "was good, listened, at my own pace, brought out more confidence"

"Did worksheets with me (young carer support) "how you were" – she offered to do the writing

Young carer service "got me back into education" "got me out of the house and made new friends"

The education centre "has smaller classes" and "sessions focus on one subject so you know what the focus is on"

A good social worker "listened, not so nosey, I said what I wanted when I wanted" "I trusted her until she left us"

What didn't help make you safer or make sure you were well looked after?

"my behaviour"

"not got me out of the school as quick as I would have liked"

"no one came round"

"the police made me scared" "the threat of taking me away in a scary way"

"had a big gap" where I didn't see anyone (referring to a social worker)

"Not having a back up plan" "Great nan could have been a back up"

"I didn't know I was on a plan"

X5 social workers on 1.5 years – "only 1 I got on with"

"social worker didn't turn up when planned and was constantly late"

"one social worker asked questions about – in front of" (the parent) "I lied and couldn't tell the full truth"

"don't ask personal questions in public like McDonalds"

"I stopped going to school due to anxiety" "the school reduced the timetable" "I told them it wouldn't help"

What could we do differently to make it better for other children like you

“social workers could listen a bit more”

“Listen to your parents a bit more”

“try and persuade my mother to be a better parent”

“stop my mum being with him”

“not being taken out of school, better to be seen at home”

“One social worker next time”

“it was better with a woman (social worker)” in relation to the male social worker “didn’t tell him anything”

“A help number to ring” (not the police)

“To have longer sessions with my mum not just to and from school” – referring to contact

“don’t know my new social workers name” (after 3 changes of social worker)

Stop “changes in social worker”

“3 changes in social worker”

I “prefer face to face” when “sharing how I feel”

“An app could help asking for help in the first place”

“Helpful to have a leaflet about the meetings who is who, what the meeting is for”

“Don’t give multiple social workers in a year” “I couldn’t trust anyone”

“I didn’t know I was on a plan” and “I didn’t know what the plan was”

Appendix 3

What worked well and how did this reduce the risk to your child

"1st social worker was really good, she supported me by going to the council with me (for rehousing)"

"The (social worker) was amazing. He really cared, worked with the family to keep them together, always on the phone checking if contact went ok. Arranged transport to school"

"School have been amazing – really good contact with the SENCO"

"Child was placed with" a family member for a short period – better than foster care"

"the headteacher was very supportive- gave the girls access to a counsellor in school"

"Bonding group at Woman's aid" was good

"social worker was very involved, on the ball, clear expectations and said it straight"

"helped funding for court"

"School nurse chased up health checks"

"small school, they know the children well"

"asked for a change in social worker" the current social worker is "amazing"

"social worker listens more to the children, makes a lot of time of us".

"1:1 tutoring worked well for" my child

What didn't work so well and why?

"Hasn't had a social worker since June (4 months)"

"Multiple changes of social worker"

"Different social worker for siblings who are placed separately, the children would like to have the same one"

"Permanency plan not clarified"

My sister looked after my children "once she had the kids, they didn't get any help. They asked for some financial help" which "didn't get agreed"

"Child X was told to report my drinking" she has been "given too much responsibility, always on edge".

"The police arrived at 10 pm to take the children, since that day" the children have lived with me "7 months of hell for nothing" (children were looked after for 7 months)

The children were on a CP plan for more than a year

I missed a meeting, "I forgot - but when a social worker doesn't turn up for a visit – no telephone call no nothing"

"SGO process not explained" didn't realise that the maternal aunt was being assessed as an alternative permanent carer.

"social worker changed after the final court date"

"had to repeat the story", "didn't bother reading notes or paying attention"

"social worker was difficult to get hold of, left messages - didn't return calls"
"another worker helped to fill out the court papers" (duty social worker)
"didn't know" the case had closed. "thought there would be support around managing contact".
"Social worker gave evidence in Court and didn't say goodbye" (worker then changed)
"social worker has a strong accent and is very difficult to understand. Don't check if understood"
A father didn't hear of domestic abuse incidents from the police. He "was told by the neighbours"
Decision making was "dragged out" "she was given too many chances"
"first social worker was rude and abrupt"
"end of the CP plan means no support"
"health professionals don't listen" they "took him off his meds anyway"
"feel blamed" – "you aren't a good parent"
"Drs should listen to children"
Schools don't deal with bullying "just send children home from school"
"no consequences" when a parent didn't cooperate with the CP plan.
"she (child) was considered to be more safe as she was going out, waste of time because of what was happening at home"
"didn't get copies of reports before meetings"
"sometimes unclear if she did or didn't have a social worker"
"90% of meetings and visits were late"

What could agencies do differently to improve

"Explain stuff more"
"train staff before you send them out"
Deal with bullying
Support for mums "that understand Domestic Abuse"
"Speak to each other – no one (agencies) co-operate any more"
"Housing knew that X was on a child protection plan, they still didn't co-operate"