

Sir Roger Singleton
C/o Jan Stockwell
Department for Children, Schools and Families
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

February 2, 2009

Dear Sir Roger,

Review of safeguarding arrangements in independent schools, non-maintained special schools and boarding schools

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the review you are leading on safeguarding arrangements in independent schools, non-maintained special schools and boarding schools in England.

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) is the UK's leading charity specialising in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children. In drawing together this submission of evidence we have reviewed calls to ChildLine, a service provided by the NSPCC, and have spoken with NSPCC representatives on Local Safeguarding Children Boards in England. Both of these sources have provided quantifiable evidence regarding child protection concerns in independent schools, as follows:

1. Calls to ChildLine

ChildLine is the UK's free, 24-hour helpline for children in distress. Trained volunteer counsellors comfort, advise and protect children and young people who may feel they have nowhere else to turn. Over 1,000 volunteers provide a counselling service, supervised by a team of professional supervisors and managers.

Over an eight-month period, between 1st April and 30th November 2008, ChildLine received 61 calls from children in independent schools who had been bullied. Of these, 41 children attended boarding school and 20 children attended a private day school. We consider that ChildLine will have received a greater number of calls from children in independent schools with concerns about bullying during this period, but as not all children describe the type of school they attend we cannot be certain about the figures.

The nature of the calls varied; the example that follow provide a useful insight into the main issues:

A young boy called because he had started a new private school and a gang of boys had been picking on him and beating him up.

A male caller attending a private school was being bullied on the bus. His Mum and teacher are both aware and had told him to ignore the boys.

A young boy called to say he is bullied at his private school where he has had his clothes and kit stolen.

A teenage caller said he is having a hard time at his private school. He gets teased because his parents aren't wealthy. He feels 'out of place' and misses his friends from his last school.

A teenage age girl called from her private school where she is being called names. She has some friends but doesn't feel good about herself.

Two of the callers stated concerns about cyberbullying. One of these involved photographs on the Bebo site and the other the posting of videos and derogatory comments online.

Five young people mentioned self harm as a result of bullying and of these three children discussed the possibility of suicide.

Bereavement was a fairly common theme emerging from the calls. Of the 61 children who called, six stated that one of their parents had died.

Six of the callers were young people from overseas. In three cases, the young people were being bullied because of their accent, one was bullied about her weight and the other two did not state the nature of the bullying.

In three calls, the young people mentioned homophobic bullying. In two cases this referred to bullying young people about their sexuality and in one case this referred to the sexual orientation of a parent.

Two callers stated that they were bullied because of their ethnic background. One child called because he wore a turban and the other stated that he was the only child from an African-Caribbean background in the school. Another child stated that he was the only black child in a private day school and that he was being called racist names but was afraid to tell his parents or the teachers. For example:

A teenage boy at a private school was bullied because of his turban. He told his teacher about the bullying but it is still going on and he is unsure what to do next.

2. Evidence from NSPCC Local Safeguarding Children Board representatives

In April 2008, the NSPCC carried out a survey of NSPCC representatives on Local Safeguarding Children Boards about the key safeguarding issues for

education professionals in all education settings. The NSPCC has representatives on 60 per cent of LSCBs and ACPCs in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The survey received 41 responses and 12 of these included information and concerns about safeguarding in independent schools.

Some of these responses highlighted more than one concern about safeguarding in independent schools. These are summarised below:

- The most frequently mentioned issue for independent schools was a lack of contact/ engagement. This included reference to lack of engagement with LSCBs.
- Three respondents highlighted concerns about safe recruitment and employment practices for education staff working in independent schools.

3. Safeguarding disabled children in residential special schools

In 2004, the NSPCC published *Safeguarding disabled children in residential special schools*, a research report on work with residential special schools for children with severe and multiple physical and learning disabilities, to examine child protection policies and practice. It aimed to identify and describe good practice models for child welfare and protection. I have enclosed a copy of the report with this letter.

The report found that schools with high child protection awareness and good child protection practice had explicit whistleblowing procedures, combined with an open, 'no blame' culture and good staff support. Where there was a more rigid, hierarchical approach, poor practice could be found. Schools did not always receive the degree of support and awareness of child protection issues and disability that they should have been able to expect from external services, including child protection services and recording and reporting practice varied considerably within and across schools.

4. Anecdotal concerns about safeguarding in independent schools

The NSPCC also provides, upon request, child protection training and consultancy services and has a Child Protection in Sport Unit. Through both of these services, concerns have been raised about child protection and safeguarding issues in independent schools. These include a lack of awareness about child protection and the need to link with LSCBs and safeguarding leads in local authorities, misinterpreted concerns and inappropriate management of cases when allegations of abuse have been made. For example, in one case, a school believed the account of a teacher who had applied to work in an independent school even though he had been barred from working with children and young people.

5. Inspection and the regulatory framework for independent schools

We do not have evidence from our practice in relation to the inspection and regulatory framework for schools but we are reassured that your review will be

looking at this to ensure that the inspection framework and staff qualifications are appropriate for ensuring good child protection practice.

Recommendations

From the evidence available to us, we have identified three key areas in which improvement is needed:

- 1. Promotion of safe environments for children and young people in schools.** Calls to ChildLine highlight worrying concerns about bullying in independent schools. Although it is difficult to draw comparisons with the level and severity of bullying in maintained and state schools, it is essential that every independent school should uphold the right of every child to be protected and to live in a safe environment as enshrined in Article 19 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. This is important for all children and young people in formal education, and particularly important for those who live away from home for extended periods. For example, children and young people living in independent boarding school accommodation may not have a parent or carer they can readily turn to for support and advice. We recommend that every independent school provides accessible information and details about ChildLine so that a child or young person who is being abused can talk to someone in confidence. We further recommend that all independent schools should have an effective bullying policy that should be devised by all members of the school community and a school counselling service which pupils can use if they need help and support.
- 2. Better safeguarding knowledge.** Vetting individuals working in the education system and barring those who are unsuitable to do so plays a critical part in safeguarding children, but it is only one element of a much wider picture. Safeguarding children requires broader action. Alongside CRB checks, independent schools must maintain a culture of vigilance about risks to children and a clear understanding about appropriate interaction with children, challenging unacceptable behaviour, providing examples of good conduct and ensuring children and young people know where to turn if they have problems or are being abused.
- 3. Improved links between LSCBs and independent schools.** The LSCB is the key statutory mechanism for agreeing how the relevant organisations in each local area will co-operate to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, and ensures the effectiveness of what they do. Although there are good links between some LSCBs and independent schools there is clearly further work to be done to ensure that all independent schools are properly involved with their LSCB. They should at a minimum know who on their LSCB to approach if they have any concerns about child protection or need advice on training requirements for staff to keep their child protection knowledge and skills up to date.

I hope that you find this information useful. If there is anything you would like clarifying please contact me on 020 7825 1352 or earkell@nspcc.org.uk

Yours sincerely

Emily Arkell
Policy Adviser – Safeguarding