



Learning from our past

The Children's Society has been in existence for 140 years and over this time practice for working with children and young people has changed considerably. We have helped many, many children but there have been times when we have failed some of the very young people that we set out to help. For this we are deeply sorry. In June 2017, we issued a public apology to those who had suffered harm or abuse whilst in our care, including those children who, as part of government backed migration programmes, were migrated abroad by us between 1883 and 1961. This apology was updated in March 2020 to reflect our determination to make it easier for abuse to be reported, to show our commitment to continuously reflect and learn from the past and to provide transparent communication about past mistakes.

The purpose of this document is to share the learning we have gained from the past. It summarises how we have used this learning, alongside our ongoing learning from our current practice and best practice developments from across our sector, to improve the way we work today both in relation to non-recent allegations of abuse but also continuing to keep safe those children and young people using our services now. It is a demonstration of our promise to continuously seek to improve policy and practice in working with children and young people now and into the future.

During 2017 we commissioned a review of allegations of child abuse by former service users, including children who had lived in children's homes, foster homes, or who were adopted by The Children's Society. The review also considered a small number of allegations made about community based projects. This internal review happened alongside a commitment to support the work of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse¹ during 2017 and ongoing. Based on learnings from the findings of these internal and external reviews at the time, an action plan was developed in 2018. The actions included developing a stronger governance framework to ensure leadership oversight of non-recent abuse cases; providing adequate resource to support allegations of non-recent abuse (including offers of counselling where appropriate to provide this); to improve the policy and procedures for managing allegations of non-recent abuse; to ensure the charity archives and records were well preserved and maintained for those wishing to access their records; and continue to promote and develop a culture of openness, curiosity, and constructive challenge and scrutiny in relation to these cases. Over an 18 month period these actions were implemented with oversight from charity trustees and the executive leadership team.

¹ Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) www.iicsa.org.uk

A robust governance framework was introduced that ensured better oversight and leadership of non-recent abuse allegations and the learning coming from this. Trustees provide oversight and play a central role in giving constructive challenge. They assert their commitment to outstanding governance across all levels of the organisation and make certain there is an appropriate culture of openness throughout.

This included a Trustee Historical Abuse Task and Finish Group being established, reporting to the charity's Risk, Audit and Compliance Committee (RACC). Membership of the Task and Finish Group includes the Chief Executive Officer, Trustees, the Head of Safeguarding and Quality Practice and the Executive Director for Children and Young People, and is chaired by the Lead Trustee for Safeguarding.

It was recognised that there needed to be more safeguarding resource to ensure best practice in dealing with historic abuse allegations. In 2018 a Safeguarding Advisor for Historical Abuse was appointed to lead on developing and promoting best policy and practice in this area using our learning, the voices of victims, and that of wider sector learning around best practice, and also to work directly with victims providing a point of contact and guidance. This included supporting them in relation to their disclosures, aiding them in the access to records process, and helping them navigate appropriate counselling and individual support.

The Children's Society has ensured robust record keeping throughout its history, and we continue to learn and understand how important it is for people to access their records. Whilst a legal responsibility, it is also vital for supporting those who wish to understand more about their experiences within the care system and to make sure children and young people have the opportunity to understand their personal life story. The Children's Society continues to work hard to ensure an efficient, easy to access and thorough system for record keeping and storage. The commitment to preserve future records continues with current children's case files and this is managed through a secure electronic case management system. The charity has a comprehensive and well-organised archive system, managed through a dedicated Access to Records Team, and a Records and Archive Service.

Our learning has focused on how we can better respond to non-recent abuse cases and also keeping safe children and young people who are currently using our services. . This included improving our systems for managing allegations about the abuse of children, and how we support the identification and disclosure of abuse. Areas strengthened as a consequence of our internal learning, understanding wider developments in best practice, and changes and updates in national guidance and legislation, have been:

- Whistleblowing,
- Managing allegations and concerns,
- Safer recruitment processes,
- Providing clear pathways for disclosures, and
- Management oversight and training of staff.

Our learning from our past, alongside powerful messages that are shared from survivor projects (such as The Truth Project²) highlight the vital principle of recognising the need to support victims to be heard, and the need to ensure that pathways for victims are available for reporting. We have learnt that the majority of sexual abuse victims do not disclose the abuse at the time it happens. Research tells us that it is not uncommon for there to be delays in disclosing trauma for multiple reasons, such as threats, coercion and control, feelings of shame, being made to feel blame and a fear of consequences. Our review of past cases in 2017 highlighted that over 70% of reports of child sexual abuse were made 20 years after the alleged abuse. This indicates that the vast majority of those who allege abuse went through long periods of their lives feeling either that they were unable to report their experiences, or that they did not want to, and we have to acknowledge that for some, feeling that they went unheard.

It is therefore essential that organisations build on ways to **support victims to feel able to report experiences of abuse** and **enable trusted and positive relationships** where service users feel valued and that they will be listened to, and taken seriously. The Children's Society recognises that we must always hear the voices of children and adult victims so they can feel as comfortable as possible to report current and/or non-recent abuse.

To this end, The Children's Society recognises the need for **victims to access supportive services** should they need them, and to access and to be offered opportunities to correct their records from the past. We recognise that accessing records (and reflecting upon them) is often a painful process and have made a pledge to offer such services for those previous victims of abuse in need. In 2017, The Children's Society joined the Counselling in Companies service, this service is offered through our Non-Recent Abuse Lead to those who allege abuse whilst in the care of The Children's Society and request counselling services.

During 2019, we commissioned a further independent review of past cases. The findings of this review reconfirmed the findings and learning of the previous independent case review in 2017, but also added a learning that had not previously surfaced - the need to recognise the valuable and dedicated commitment of the majority of The Children's Society staff over many years. For some staff we recognise that they may have also been affected by abuse they have witnessed or suspected to be taking place to the children and young people that they were dedicated to supporting. This dedication has supported hundreds of thousands of children and young people, keeping them safe and enabling them to thrive as children and adults. It was recognised that this great work needed to be publicly acknowledged and celebrated as part of our history.

Safeguarding standards are more rigorous today than ever before, but the risk of harm persists. We also know that our world is rapidly changing and this brings challenges. We will keep reviewing and improving our practice so that we can reduce the risk of abuse, or the risk of abuse remaining undetected. To achieve the changes

² The Truth Project: Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. www.truthproject.org.uk/i-will-be-heard

above, The Children's Society is committed to continually reflect on the challenges that rapid organisational change brings. We will continue to promote a strong, ethical leadership style which is transparent and curious. The Children's Society is not perfect, and we will no doubt make mistakes in the future, but we hope that with the culture of openness, transparency, curiosity and learning that we have embedded we will have done everything in our power to keep children and young people safe.