‘Rethinking Child Protection Strategy’
Findings from an analysis of key areas
of child protection and safeguarding
strategy

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We reviewed the consequences of the current referral and assessment strategy, set out in national level statutory guidance.

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<th>Analysis of the legal and policy framework</th>
<th>Trend and prevalence analysis</th>
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<td>Child protection &amp; safeguarding strategy conflates ss.17 &amp; 47. Policy interpretation of legislation potentially <em>ultra vires</em>. Shift from intention of CA 1989 and loses the importance of consent in all but s.47 cases.</td>
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<td>The significant increase in referrals over 25 years (311%) has not led to a reduction in child abuse. There has, however, been a significant reduction in the child abuse detection ratio from 24% to 7%.</td>
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<th>Adverse event response analysis</th>
<th>Risk prediction analysis</th>
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<td>Serious Case Review findings are narrow and formulaic. They enable a culture of over-intervention driven by fear of the consequences of under-intervention.</td>
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<td>The certainty of risk prediction is generally poorly understood. For example, a 10,000 family study predicting risk and used to underpin national adoption of this strategy resulted in a greater than 97% incidence of false positives and 17.5% false negatives.</td>
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What does the evidence tell us about the current strategy?
‘Transformative’ layer of analysis: producing new theoretical insights

(1) Our analysis of the legal and policy framework led to identification of:
The theory of child protection circuit

(2) Our trend and prevalence analysis led to identification of:
The law of diminishing returns ratio

(3) Our adverse event response analysis led to identification of:
The outlier paradox

(4) Our risk prediction analysis led to identification of:
The welfare/policing dichotomy

Overall conclusion: There is argument for a revised ethico-legal model (framework) of child protection guiding local practice
‘Theory of child protection circuit’: A self-justifying series of presumptions?

(1) There is a high prevalence of child abuse which can be defined and identified

(2) That the state has a duty to do so, and to take steps to protect a child once it has done so

(3) That in order to do so a system of risk prediction is possible with a sufficiently accurate confidence limit

(4) Following risk prediction timely early intervention is an appropriate welfare response to mitigate the risks of future abuse in families identified as high risk

(5) That failure to predict and mitigate serious cases of child abuse are investigated by public inquiries and SCRs, aiming to establish how to do the previous 1-4 ‘truth’s ‘ better because...
The law of diminishing returns ratio: The number of referrals has dramatically increased since the Children Act 1989. Reducing thresholds and diminished need for consent. Vast majority of cases yield no evidence of abuse (significant harm). Has reduced the efficiency ratio for child abuse detection.

The welfare/policing dichotomy: is a consequence of mixing welfare with a regulatory agenda in social work. Worldwide research shows this has an unintended consequence of alienating and traumatising non-abusing families. Prevalence of abuse in society is, according to the NSPCC’s studies not reducing.

The outlier paradox: From our analysis of serious case review findings over the past 25 years it is evident that some of the characteristics of families who seriously and fatally abuse their children are similar to some of the characteristics of families who are not abusing their children and who do not need or want social work intervention. This elevates a twofold problem: the difficulty of identifying really serious cases that require urgent intervention, and the difficulty of identifying families who need to be filtered out following referral at an early stage.
Key areas for rethinking child protection strategy

A confused system characterised by a welfare/policing dichotomy

**Fundamental aim of system** – theoretically assistive/supportive (welfare) but ‘policing’ embedded into previously consensual aspects - problematic for all but the most vulnerable families where children are clearly meeting the s.47 threshold.

A problem for families faced with the ‘working with’ agenda.

‘Working with’ now = necessary compliance or risk of escalation into progressively more coercive stages of the system

**Bespoke remedy:** is there a case for a remedy for families harmed by the current strategy? Are existing remedies adequate? Theoretically yes, research suggests not.

**Supporting the family** – emerging reports of harm caused by the current approach, and the lack of clear ‘whole system’ evidence that the current approach adequately addresses the problem of child abuse suggest deeper consideration of system consequences and a rethink of the current strategy.
Rethinking Child Protection Strategy project publications


