

THE COLLEGE OF **SOCIAL WORK**

With responsibility and respect

Consultation to establish a media strategy
for child protection incidents





“Our aim is to ensure that media coverage of child protection delivers the information that the public has a right to know.”

Introduction

Child protection will always stir powerful emotions.

Whenever an incident triggers a serious case review, the public has a right to know how and why such a tragedy could have occurred. The media has a duty to investigate and report on the events surrounding the case.

Carried out responsibly, this media scrutiny can bring transparency to a complex and poorly understood area of social care. It can highlight the huge challenges faced by all who work in child protection. It should also seek to hold those professionals to account.

Above all it should respect the rights and dignity of the children and the families involved.

This consultation is designed to facilitate such responsible reporting. It aims to help social workers, their employers and other child protection professionals work with the media in a non-confrontational manner that encourages truthful, accurate and relevant coverage of serious case reviews and of social work in general.

Managed by The College of Social Work, the consultation process will canvas the views of a range of professionals – those who work in child protection, communications specialists, press officers and journalists.

The aim is to help develop guidelines that ensure media coverage of child protection issues delivers the information that the public wants to know, that it has the right to know and that it can trust.

This consultation document has been produced following suggestions from the Media and public confidence sub-group of the *Munro Review of Child Protection*.

The College of Social Work

The College of Social Work is a new independent organisation set up to provide leadership to a much-criticised profession whose achievements often go unrecognised. One of our most important roles is to be a voice for social workers in public and media debate.

Please email your responses to **collegeconsultations@scie.org.uk** by July 29, 2011.

See end of document for further information about The College or go to **www.collegeofsocialwork.org**

Aim of this consultation

The aim of this consultation is to help ensure that the professional response to serious child protection incidents is communicated quickly, coherently and sincerely. This response should:



- help the public to understand what has happened and why
- protect the welfare and (where appropriate) identity of any children, family members and others concerned in the case
- hold agencies and professionals accountable for their actions
- improve public understanding of how child protection is carried out.

To help deliver these priorities we have developed a series of suggested principles for good practice. It is on these principles that we are asking for your opinion. Do you agree with them? Do you disagree? Or do you have any suggestions of your own? After each set of principles we have posed a number of questions that you may like to consider. Alternatively, simply send us a general comment that covers the issues discussed.

We are also seeking examples of good practice that may illustrate the issues discussed. Please send any good practice examples along with your consultation response.

Important notes

- These principles are not intended to interfere with the usual processes for notifying Government about serious child protection cases.
- The principles are written from a social work perspective. However, accurate and balanced coverage will require a similar approach from other professions involved in child protection such as the health and police services.
- While transparency is to be encouraged, legal restrictions mean there is much information surrounding child protection incidents that cannot be shared.

Principles of good practice

Understanding social work and child protection

1. Partners on Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs), particularly local authorities, should actively foster good relations with the media. This should include a strong focus on child protection and social work, seeking to celebrate good practice as well as scrutinise problems.
2. It is important to remember that the media has a responsibility to report on issues that are in the public interest. While legal restrictions prevent the sharing of specific case information, general information about the profession should be shared where possible.
3. The College of Social Work is available to advise local authorities on handling serious incidents and will provide support to local authorities/LSCBs whenever there is a high profile case. The College of Social Work has been established as a source of expertise for the media on social work.

Should local authorities be more active in promoting a better image for social workers?

What aspects of child protection should be 'celebrated'?

What general information would you like to see shared with the media?
Can you think of any examples?

Do journalists need more information about child protection and social work generally?

How can local authorities provide balanced information about social work in a way that will interest journalists?

Email your responses to collegeconsultations@scie.org.uk



Confidentiality and legal advice

4. Legal advice is necessary to decide what information must be kept confidential and what can be shared. Protecting the family is of paramount importance.
5. Where media enquiries are made before a trial, press teams should work with their legal advisers to make sure that the media is clear on the legal position.
6. Where individuals have spoken directly to the media about aspects of a case, the local authority/LSCB should seek to give a more balanced view. Legal and press teams will offer advice on how to do this. Advice about representing the social work profession is available from The College of Social Work.

Do you ever take legal advice on sharing information with the media?

How helpful is this legal advice?

How can press teams and journalists work together to share relevant information without compromising confidentiality or the law? Do you have any examples?

Email your responses to collegeconsultations@scie.org.uk



Forward planning

7. Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) were created under the Children Act 2004 and have lead responsibility to keep children safe. They are required to define the approach they will take to handling any serious incident and galvanise all partners to respond and manage incidents, including Serious Case Reviews.
8. LSCBs should decide the media strategy in the event of a serious child protection incident, designating a 'lead agency' to coordinate communications. Usually, the local authority will take the lead, bringing in all relevant partners such as police and health colleagues. However, there may also be occasions where different partners take the lead role.
9. The LSCB or designated lead agency should share the media strategy with the press. This will aid transparency and support a common understanding of the factors that may restrict the flow of information at times.

Who should be in charge of the media strategy?

Do you have examples of proactive joint working between the LSCB / its partners and media to explain what will happen in the event of a serious incident?

What details would be most useful for journalists to know?

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Working together

10. In the event of a serious child protection incident, the lead agency should convene a panel of relevant professionals from across the LSCB/neighbouring areas. This may report to the LSCB.
11. The lead agency should manage media liaison activities, such as routing press queries, deciding who delivers briefings, organising the panel's meetings schedule etc.
12. The legal and communications teams should be involved in all relevant meetings of the panel.

13. Relevant Government departments, governing agencies, professional bodies, including The College of Social Work, should be informed straight away in confidence. This will enable them to prepare informed responses.
14. The lead agency should work with partners on the panel to prepare non-sensitive, factual briefings for internal colleagues, so that they are aware of issues before they are published in the media.
15. The lead agency should work with the panel to prepare media briefing materials.
16. Local authorities should make sure that briefing in relation to social work is included. This may include monitoring information, such as referral rates, assessments carried out, child protection plans made children in need numbers as context. Briefing information should also include key points about previous, similar cases, which can help the public understand what is happening without compromising client confidentiality.
17. Although each partner in the LSCB and panel may have specific messages for its own stakeholders, the lead agency should take the lead in communicating joint messages with the media.

Is a joint working panel a good idea?

Should one agency manage all media liaison activities?

Do you have any examples of good internal briefings?

Do you have any examples of good media briefings?

What information would journalists find useful at this time?

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Working with the media

18. The first engagement with the media is crucial. The lead agency should decide its preferred method of engaging with the media, such as whether a briefing session is required. Spokespeople must be well briefed so that they can answer questions concisely and accurately.
19. The briefing should include details of spokespeople who have no involvement in the case but have relevant expertise. The College of Social Work can provide spokespeople for the social work profession.
20. Statements should not apportion blame. Public sadness and anger may seem to demand that blame be apportioned, but this is not helpful before the case has been properly investigated. The lead agency should communicate as honestly and as openly as possible, with clear reasons given as to why information cannot be shared where this is the case (for example if a Serious Case Review is underway).

- 21.** Spokespeople should feel free to speak honestly about their regret about what has happened. They should also give details of the efforts being made to investigate why the incident happened, to review and address systematic problems and to learn lessons.

Who should be in charge of the media strategy?

Do you have examples of proactive joint working between the LSCB / its partners and media to explain what will happen in the event of a serious incident?

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Ongoing planning

- 22.** The lead agency should convene regular meetings of the panel to manage communications. Detailed communications plans, covering ongoing internal and external communications work, should be developed and implemented.
- 23.** These routine meetings should also be used to develop communications activity leading up to the trial and to the verdict, including whether there will be a pre-trial media briefing and preparations for media work immediately post-trial (unless a criminal trial is to follow).
- 24.** The lead agency and panel should develop a media plan to help journalists access the information they need. Strategic work may include sharing further 'real life' stories that help to illustrate a balanced and accurate picture of social work.
- 25.** Coverage should be monitored so that responses to stories can be made quickly. Representatives from the professions being scrutinised must continue to speak out in response to criticisms of the profession in general. The College of Social Work will be able to provide support in providing spokespeople on social work in particular.

Are there any specific issues that need to be address in the pre-trial period?

What would journalists find most useful during this stage?

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The verdict

26. The trial verdict in high profile incidents will attract a high level of interest. The panel should prepare for this and make sure that a spokesperson is briefed.
27. A senior communications officer should be available to advise on how post-verdict communication should be managed. For instance, should there be a press conference? It is important the most senior people are available to explain the case to journalists on or off camera. All materials should be clear and journalists given adequate time to read them before they ask questions.
28. Arrangements should be made for one-to-one broadcast interviews, usually from the chair of the LSCB who should summarise the issues in succinct points. All coverage - print, broadcast and web – should be recorded.
29. LSCB partners should ensure their messages to stakeholders are balanced and do not unfairly blame whole professions for individual or systematic failures.

What are the main difficulties LSCB partners face when trying to coordinate messages that don't blame other partners? How can these be overcome?

Do you have any examples of successful joint working between local agencies and the media following trial verdicts / SCR publication?

What would journalists find most useful during this stage?

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Evaluation and learning

30. After media attention around the serious incident has passed, it can be a good idea to meet with local media representatives. This will help to promote understanding between local agencies and the media. It can allow local authorities to explain why they were unable to comment on certain things and media contacts can explain the reasons for their actions at various points in the process.
31. Local processes and plans should be refreshed in light of any new learning. After a time, follow-up media activity focusing on specific aspects of the case or on presenting a balanced account of child protection practices should be planned with media contacts, particularly local and regional media.

Is a debrief session with the media feasible/desirable?

Are there any other points you would like to make in response to the consultation as a whole?

Email your responses to collegeconsultations@scie.org.uk



The College of Social Work

The College of Social work is an independent college, which is being established on the recommendation of the Social Work Task Force enabling social workers to take charge of their own professional destiny and drive up standards. Though a very young organisation, The College has begun to develop its services, which include a Policy and Communications Unit that offers:

- resources for journalists
- balanced and informative case studies about different aspects of social work
- social work spokespeople who can be called upon to speak on a range of national and local social work issues
- A national programme of advice events for:
 - social work employers, to help develop their skills in working effectively with the media; and
 - national and local media to help foster a deeper understanding of social work; and
- a plan for its growing membership to contribute to national and local debates about the profession.

Contact our media team:

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and

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Appendix

Why are we doing this?

The criticism that social workers have faced when serious incidents occur has been well documented:

- A 2006 literature review on media representations of social work and social workers found that the media has taken a continually critical view of the profession since the 1970s.ⁱ
- More recent coverage such as that following the Baby Peter case, where social workers were viewed as being culpable in their failure to protect, has also had a negative influence on the public perception and the recruitment of social workers.ⁱⁱ

Evidence suggests that this can not only damage the social work profession, but also impact on the child protection system in ways that make it less safe for children.

- A 2009 LGA poll found that 42 per cent of people's views of social work had got worse since the Baby Peter case.ⁱⁱⁱ
- When public confidence in the profession is undermined, which can affect referrals and create spikes in demand – managing such a high rate of referrals has become so problematic that it has had a serious effect on all other aspects of social work.^{iv}
- Many social workers are concerned about the way in which the profession is reported on in the media and the impact this is having on recruitment, morale and public perception.^v

Decisions about child protection are among the most complex that any professional group has to make. Child and family social workers often make difficult judgment calls, such as whether a child should be moved from a family based on whether there is evidence or suspicion of maltreatment, or how best to work with a family unit in an attempt to improve their relationships.

Presenting the full picture in relation to the complexities of child protection can only help society to understand more about what child protection work entails.

Just as the media's reporting of mental health issues has, over recent years dramatically improved, it is hoped that a similar improvement can be brought about in the area of child protection.

ⁱ Galilee, J (2006), Literature Review on Media Representation of Social Work and Social Workers, Edinburgh, Scottish Executive

ⁱⁱ Elsley, S (2008), Media Coverage of Child Deaths in the UK: The Impact of Baby P: A Case For Influence? CLiCP Briefing The University of Edinburgh, NSPCC

ⁱⁱⁱ LGA Press Release, 25 March 2009, <http://www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pageId=1738929>

^{iv} The Munro Review of Child Protection, Part One: A Systems Analysis (2010), p,27

^v Building a Safe and Confident Future, The Final Report of the Social Work Task Force, (2009), p.4

Making sure your voice is heard

We want to make sure that our members are always given the opportunity to help shape and influence the future of the social work profession.

Tell us what you think by emailing your responses to collegeconsultations@scie.org.uk

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