

## Children and Young People Select Committee Scrutiny Review of *A Safer Place for Children*

### Summary of Evidence

#### Original Brief

##### **Which of our strategic corporate objectives does this topic address?**

Council Plan Objective – Ensure effective multi-agency safeguarding for the most vulnerable children and young people

##### **What are the main issues and overall aim of this review?**

Stockton-on-Tees Local Safeguarding Children Board's Policy Guidelines *A Safer Place for Children* have been in place since July 2012. The Guidelines are intended to support organisations responsible for public setting such as libraries, neighbourhood centres and sports centres to seek to ensure that these public settings are a safe place for the children who use them.

The Select Committee is tasked with conducting an independent review of Council policy with a view to commenting on whether the guidelines are appropriate or whether there should be any revisions to them.

Following consultation, the Committee will consider whether the guidelines are appropriate or whether to recommend any changes to the guidelines.

##### **The Committee will undertake the following key lines of enquiry:**

The Committee will review the full guidelines but will give specific consideration to the recommended age guidelines for public settings.

##### **Who will the Committee be trying to influence as part of its work?**

Council Services and Commissioned Services, Voluntary and Community Sector, Local Safeguarding Board and Members agencies

##### **What information do we need?**

Who can provide us with further relevant evidence? (Cabinet Member, officer, service user, general public, expert witness, etc.)

What specific areas do we want them to cover when they give evidence?

Shaun McLurg

Background and Context

Steve Chaytor

View of Tees Active

Catalyst

VCS Perspective

Reuben Kench

Views of Library Service

Feedback from Council Services and Commissioned Services, Voluntary and Community Sector, Local Safeguarding Board and Members agencies on the guidelines and their applications

Views on guidelines and their application

## **1.0 Introduction**

1.1 The Children and Young People Select Committee were asked by the Council's Corporate Management Team to undertake an independent review of the Policy Guidelines *A Safer Place for Children*. Executive Scrutiny Committee agreed to add the review to the Scrutiny Work Programme and allocated the review to the Children and Young People Select Committee.

## **2.0 Background**

2.1 The policy guidelines *A Safer Place for Children* were developed by the Stockton on Tees Local Safeguarding Children Board (SLSCB) and finalised in August 2012. The guidelines were subsequently adopted by Stockton Borough Council's Cabinet with responsibility delegated for approving amended policies covering the various public settings run by or on behalf of Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council to the relevant Corporate Director and Lead Cabinet Member, in consultation with the Corporate Director, Children Education and Social Care. At that time, all member agencies of the Safeguarding Board were requested to review current policies against the guidelines.

2.2 *A Safer Place for Children* was developed by SLSCB to support organisations responsible for such settings to create an appropriately safe environment. The guidance was written specifically for managers of public settings who require a framework to assist them in the development of policies and procedures to promote the safety of children in public settings such as libraries and neighbourhood centres. The guidelines are to be read in conjunction with other policies and procedures of the Local Safeguarding Children Boards in the Tees area.

## **3.0 Evidence**

3.1 The Committee received an initial presentation from Shaun McLurg setting out the context for the development of the policy guidelines the issues that had arisen in relation to their operation.

3.2 The Committee were advised that the LSCB had developed the proposals in response to a sexual assault on a child which had occurred in Ragworth Neighbourhood Centre.

3.3 The incident highlighted the absence of guidelines in relation to the admission of children into public settings (where children were not part of supervised activities with staff in loco parentis i.e. taking the responsibility of a parent). The policy guidelines were therefore developed and sought to set out what safeguards could be expected to be put in place by public settings.

3.4 As the LSCB embarked on developing the policy, it became clear that there was a lack of information and guidelines nationally in relation to this issue. However, as a result of consultation undertaken by the LSCB, the policy guidelines were developed. As part of the guidelines, the LSCB decided that it would be inappropriate for children under the age of 10 to be allowed unsupervised into public settings unless they were accompanied by an adult. This age was identified because it was felt that this was an age where parents were beginning to allow children more freedom. Since the adoption of the policy by the LSCB and Cabinet, several member agencies of the LSCB had questioned the age restriction (in particular Tees Active) and this had led to the request for the policy to be reviewed by the Select Committee

3.5 In order to review the policy guidelines, the Committee asked for feedback on the operation of the policy guidelines from:

- council services/ commissioned services with responsibility for public settings
- voluntary and community sector organisation via Catalyst
- member agencies of the Local Safeguarding Children Board
- Chief Executive – Tees Active
- Head of Leisure and Culture
- Corporate Director for Children, Education and Social Care
- Independent Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board

### **Council Services**

3.6 The following responses were received:

3.7 Community Engagement – commented that it would be helpful to be able to submit draft documents for specific buildings to someone from the safeguarding team for comment/guidance as part of the process of development rather than the end and suggested that it would be helpful to seek the views of front line members of staff at venues in a mix of areas to understand some of the issues that they deal with to inform your policy review.

3.8 Adult Services - CRB information in the appendix needs to be updated in line with the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) arrangements.

3.9 Finance, Governance and Assets – Council may need to think about community groups who run community centres and also the OnSite Trust who manage some of the buildings and whether we share this policy with them as an expectation.

3.10 Customer Services and Taxation – happy that the guidelines could be adopted by Customer Services in the event that an unaccompanied child found their way into one of our Customer Service Centres.

### **Voluntary and Community Sector**

3.11 Steve Rose, Chief Executive of Catalyst attended the meeting to present feedback from the voluntary and community Sector. He commented that awareness of safeguarding issues across the sector and uptake of training and Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks was encouraging. An area of concern was safeguarding in parks and play areas and reporting of suspicious activity.

3.12 SRCGA recommend that all management committees of community centres should undertake safeguarding training and insist that all committee members go through a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check. SRCGA estimate that 80% of the groups they work with have undertaken safeguarding training. SRCGA also base their work on SBC guidelines.

3.13 Many management committees demonstrate concerns that, whilst they undertake training and develop policies, they are not able to oversee every group or activity that hires space in their centre. As a result of this report, SRCGA are going to work with them to review room hire agreements to include a statement about clear responsibility for

safeguarding children and vulnerable adults to improve the current clause which is more general about being responsible for all who are taking part.

3.14 The DBS service is, increasingly, rejecting applications from voluntary and community groups stating that these people do not need clearance. SRCGA is concerned that safeguarding quality will decline as a result.

3.15 In relation to OnSite Community Building Trust, all staff and volunteers are DBS checked and go through safeguarding training. OnSite are now reviewing their room hire agreements to incorporate more overt statements about responsibility for child safeguarding.

3.16 Steve Rose highlighted that most safeguarding training has been undertaken under the auspices of the Stockton Local Safeguarding Children Board (SLSCB) which has proved effective and popular and there was now a concern that there was a proposal to start charging the VCS for this training in order to meet costs. Based on this short piece of work, he felt it was evident that the number of participants in these courses would fall and non-accredited support would replace the SLSCB training. It was hoped that Catalyst, as an SLSCB Board member, could change the proposal and that the current desire for high standards could be met with continued quality training and support.

### **Managing Director – Tees Active**

3.17 Steve Chaytor, Managing Director of Tees Active re-submitted written comments which had been previously provided after the policy guidelines were first adopted. He highlighted the following comments to the Select Committee:

- The current policy of not admitting unaccompanied children under the age of 8 into leisure centres/ swimming pools had been in place for 10 years (and prior to the formation of TAL) and had proven to be robust and was in line with long-standing industry guidelines and was the practice in almost every swimming pool in the country. Tees Active have not found another organisation that had adopted the threshold of 10 years
- The NSPCC Child Protection in Sport Unit had advised that the Tees Active policy was robust and there would need to be a good reason to change it
- If 8 and 9 year olds were not admitted, they may be at more risk outside of the setting in potentially less safe environments
- The age thresholds in the policy guidelines do not apply to parks and open spaces and the current policy has a differential approach to Events where it still recommends 8 years. He felt that this supported the view that there was room for different thresholds within the same policy
- Changing the policy would result in an estimated 15,000 exclusions per year across all Tees Active leisure facilities and would deter children from taking part in sport and physical activity
- Leisure Centres had high levels of supervision and CCTV coverage and staff were trained in safeguarding. Staff training at Tees Active has enabled children at risk to

be identified and the relevant authorities notified. This would not have happened if 10 years had been the threshold

- There was scope for a differential recognising that access to leisure facilities is different to other venues such as libraries and community centres. He commented that there was an argument to be made that leisure centres were supervised and organised and that even within the scope of the current wording there would be no need to apply a 10 threshold
- There is a national debate at the moment, triggered by the Stockton case, which Tees Active hope and expect will lead to national guidelines. He felt that it would be better to await that outcome of this work which could be adopted by everyone
- In conclusion, Tees Active believe strongly that moving from 8 to 10 years puts children at greater not reduced risk and they have seen no evidence to support moving to a 10 year threshold

### **Head of Leisure and Culture**

3.18 The Head of Leisure and Culture advised the Committee that he had triggered a piece of work to develop a new set of national guidelines for safeguarding in leisure settings, designed to pick up the issue of unaccompanied children in communal spaces. All current guidelines dealt with health and safety in classes, pools, etc. but not with the specifics of safeguarding in changing rooms or the passages and times between the drop off and the activity, or during the activity breaks in the unsupervised areas of a building. The NSPCC Director of Children's Safety in Sport was leading the piece of work and the guidelines would be produced in the name of the NSPCC. It was anticipated that the work would conclude within the next 12 months.

3.19 He confirmed that libraries were applying the policy guidelines in relation to the age threshold for unaccompanied children. It was highlighted that visiting a library was largely a self-guided activity and therefore if children visited a library some of their time in the library was likely to be unsupervised. One issue was that older siblings often accompanied younger children in library settings.

### **Corporate Director of Children, Education and Social Care**

3.20 The Director of Children, Education and Social Care attended the Select Committee to give her view. The Director is a professionally qualified Social Worker.

3.21 The Director was strongly of the view that the LSCB Safeguarding Guidance, which has also been agreed as Council policy, should remain in place and that the age for children entering public settings unaccompanied by an adult should not be reduced from the current age of 10 years.

3.22 The Director felt that by being explicit about the expectation of parents around the age at which children should be accompanied was giving a clear message that both the LSCB and the Council did not expect children under the age of 10 to be unsupervised in public settings.

3.23 The Director also made reference to the fact that she was aware that there has been a recent incident in one of the Leisure settings where an adult has been charged

with taking indecent photographs of children within the changing area (this is the case recently in the paper).

3.24 The Director was also of the personal view that Leisure type settings in particular also give more opportunities for people to access children in areas where they may be in a state of undress.

3.25 The Director asked the Committee to clearly evidence their reasons for changing the age threshold if they were minded to do so, but it was her advice to them to keep the age guideline at 10.

### **Independent Chair of the Local Safeguarding Board**

3.26 Colin Morris, Independent Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board commented that from a personal perspective he felt that the age guidance identified within the existing policy guidance was helpful and appropriate and he would not easily be persuaded to lower this.

### **Glossary**

ASFC	A Safer Place for Children
SLSCB	Stockton Local Safeguarding Children Board
LSCB	Local Safeguarding Children Board
DBS	Disclosure and Barring Service
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector
SRCGA	Stockton Residents and Community Groups Association
NSPCC	National Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children