

Urgent action to protect children with disabilities from abuse

A national review into safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs has revealed serious failures at 3 residential special schools registered as children's homes. The independent review looks at the experiences of 108 children and young adults living at Fullerton House, Wilsic Hall and Wheatley House, located in Doncaster and operated by the Hesley Group.

The report shows a culture of abuse and harm, including evidence of physical abuse and violence, neglect, emotional abuse and sexual harm. There was also evidence that medication was misused and maladministered, an over-use of restraints, and unsafe and inappropriate use of temporary confinement. The children affected were placed at these homes from 55 local authorities across the country and there is a complex abuse investigation underway by the Doncaster Safeguarding Partnership, which includes a concurrent criminal investigation by South Yorkshire Police.

Given the severity of the allegations and evidence uncovered, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel has issued an urgent action to all local authorities to ensure all children with complex needs and disabilities currently living in similar children's homes are safe and well.

Panel Chair, Annie Hudson said:

This national review seeks to make sense of how and why a significant number of children with disabilities and complex needs came to suffer very serious abuse and neglect whilst living in 3 privately provided residential settings.

Our evidence shows that the system of checks and balances which should have detected that things were going wrong simply did not work.

While there are many skilled professionals who work with children with disabilities, we are concerned that these are not isolated incidents. That's why we have asked all local authorities and Ofsted to take urgent action to ensure all children living in similar circumstances are safe and well.

Lead Panel Member for the review, Dr Susan Tranter, said:

Children with disabilities and complex health needs are some of the most vulnerable in our society but they are too often overlooked and forgotten.

Following allegations that a significant number of children who were living far away from home, often with limited communication skills, were trapped in settings where systemic and sustained abuse was inflicted with no respite, we spoke to those responsible for placing the children in these settings and for checking on their welfare to understand exactly what went wrong.

It is clear to us that the standards of practice in care are failing to meet the needs of children with complex needs. The second phase of this national review will explore the systemic issues in children's social care, health and education that must be addressed to ensure we learn from these horrific incidents and to prevent this from happening again.

Dame Christine Lenehan, Strategic Director of the National Children's Bureau and Council for Disabled Children, said:

This review demonstrates that the residential settings responsible for taking care of these children did not have a clear vision to safeguard them from abuse. The lack of accountability across the residential care system means there is too little ownership for the safety of children with complex needs and, as a consequence, many have suffered, or are at risk of suffering, harm and abuse. We urgently need a shift in thinking, so that these children's rights to live safely in supportive and nurturing homes is guaranteed.

While the complex abuse investigation will hold to account those directly involved in the harm of these children, the national review found that the safety net that should have identified and responded to this abuse failed to act on concerns.

The [phase one report](#) sets out that Ofsted had received a number of complaints dating back to at least 2015, expressing concerns over staffing levels, staff conduct and possible abuse of the children. These complaints had promoted additional monitoring visits and an emergency inspection, but the review has found these were insufficient as both settings had been judged 'good' by Ofsted at the most recent inspection visit. In light of the most recent allegations, Ofsted conducted emergency inspections of the settings in March 2021 and notices of suspension of the service were served.

Additionally, local authorities and partner agencies placing children at these homes put great reliance on the reports provided by the settings despite professionals in different roles having separate information indicating concerns. The processes in place for bringing together information from a range of sources to analyse the pattern of safeguarding concerns was not effective.

To address these, the panel has requested local authorities and Ofsted to undertake urgent action:

- local authorities should review complaints and concerns relating to the workforce in each individual residential special school registered as a children's home over the last three years, and ensure these have been appropriately actioned
- OFSTED should conduct an immediate analysis of their evidence around workforce sufficiency focusing on suitability, training and support

The panel has been assured that the urgent actions will be completed by the end of November 2022. A second phase of this review will be published in early 2023, setting out the progress against the urgent actions and providing recommendations to government to improve safeguarding in the residential special school and care system.

The independent national Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel is an independent body that was set up in July 2018 to identify, commission and oversee reviews of serious child safeguarding cases. It brings together experts from social care, policing, health, education and the third sector to provide a multi-agency view on cases which they believe raise issues that are complex, or of national importance.

On 5 March 2021, the Doncaster Safeguarding Partnership agreed to initiate a complex abuse investigation (Operation Lemur Alpha) into the 3 specialist residential settings run by the Hesley Group. This was in response to information gathered following a whistleblowing referral reporting 12 allegations of abuse and concerns for children in Fullerton House, which was received by the Doncaster Children Services Trust on 26 February 2021. Further information about the criminal investigation should be referred to South Yorkshire Police, and about the wider complex abuse investigation should be referred to Doncaster Council – contact details available on request.

These matters were formally reported by the Doncaster Safeguarding Partnership to the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel in September 2021. The review was formally launched in January 2022. The terms of reference for the [Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel: review into safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings](#) is available on GOV.UK. The panel has worked in close co-operation with Doncaster Safeguarding Partners to deliver this phase one review report.

Any families who have concerns about a child can find more information on the [Council for Disabled Children's website](#).