

Safe from Harm

A Code of Practice for Safeguarding The Welfare of Children in Voluntary Organisations in England and Wales

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1. Summary of Recommendations

In order to safeguard the welfare of the children and young people in their charge, voluntary organisations should consider the issues raised by each of the following statements of principle and then, if they wish to do so, take any action which they deem to be appropriate in

the light of their circumstances and structures, and the nature of their activities.

1. ADOPT A POLICY STATEMENT ON SAFEGUARDING THE WELFARE OF CHILDREN.
2. PLAN THE WORK OF THE ORGANISATION SO AS TO MINIMISE SITUATIONS WHERE THE ABUSE OF CHILDREN MAY OCCUR.
3. INTRODUCE A SYSTEM WHEREBY CHILDREN MAY TALK WITH AN INDEPENDENT PERSON.
4. APPLY AGREED PROCEDURES FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN TO ALL PAID STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS.
5. GIVE ALL PAID STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS CLEAR ROLES.
6. USE SUPERVISION AS A MEANS OF PROTECTING CHILDREN.
7. TREAT ALL WOULD-BE PAID STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS AS JOB APPLICANTS FOR ANY POSITION INVOLVING CONTACT WITH CHILDREN.
8. GAIN AT LEAST ONE REFERENCE FROM A PERSON WHO HAS EXPERIENCE OF THE APPLICANT'S PAID WORK OR VOLUNTEERING WITH CHILDREN.
9. EXPLORE ALL APPLICANTS' EXPERIENCE OF WORKING OR CONTACT WITH CHILDREN IN AN INTERVIEW BEFORE APPOINTMENT.
10. FIND OUT WHETHER AN APPLICANT HAS ANY CONVICTION FOR CRIMINAL OFFENCES AGAINST CHILDREN.
11. MAKE PAID AND VOLUNTARY APPOINTMENTS CONDITIONAL ON THE SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF A PROBATIONARY PERIOD.
12. ISSUE GUIDELINES ON HOW TO DEAL WITH THE DISCLOSURE OR DISCOVERY OF ABUSE.
13. TRAIN PAID STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS, THEIR LINE MANAGERS OR SUPERVISORS, AND POLICY MAKERS IN THE PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE.

2. Introduction

Millions of children and young people are served by voluntary organisations every day. Some are enabled to gain skills or knowledge; some gain social confidence or learn a leisure pursuit; others are provided with accommodation or are given counselling and advice. It is to be hoped that all the children and young people who come into contact with voluntary organisations also receive care and attention, and that the organisations protect them from coming to any harm whilst they are working with them.

Although for the overwhelming majority of children this is the case, unfortunately it is not so for all. Very occasionally a youngster is hurt through an accident which might have been prevented by even more thorough vigilance by the voluntary organisation in whose temporary care they were. Good voluntary organisations spend much time and effort in regularly

updating their guidelines in order to prevent accidents such as these.

Even more rarely a child is abused by another child, by a stranger, or by a paid member of staff or volunteer whilst in the charge of a voluntary organisation. Abuse is always traumatic for the child and, although most abuse happens in the home, voluntary organisations must accept that prevention of abuse is part of their duty to care for the children with whom they work, and amend their practice accordingly.

This code of practice sets out principles and guidelines which will help voluntary organisations to safeguard the welfare of the children and young people under 16 years of age with whom they work.

In particular, the code seeks to enable voluntary organisations to use good management policies and practice as a means of preventing the physical, sexual and emotional abuse of children whilst they are in the care of the organisation.

The code imposes no new statutory duty on voluntary organisations. It supports and reinforces existing legislation and sets out some key principles which are designed to help voluntary organisations to consider how best to fulfil their duty to care for the children and young people with whom they come into contact.

There are many types of voluntary organisation which work with children and young people up to 16 years old, and this code of practice aims to be relevant to them all. For the larger, professionally managed childcare or youth organisations, the code may only reflect practices which they have already introduced to meet the requirements of legislation and/or registration, or have adopted in the light of experience. For these organisations the code may prove a useful check-list against which to compare their current practice.

Some smaller organisations may have no current policy on safe-guarding the welfare of children. For them the code will provide a framework for action, helping them to introduce practices which are appropriate to them in a systematic way.

It is not possible for the code to state precisely what such a wide range of voluntary organisations should do to protect children in every situation and the code does not lay down a series of procedures which must be followed by every organisation. Nor is it the intention that the code should encourage organisations to over protect children and thus deny them the chance to learn and grow through taking calculated risks. Instead the code offers a set of principles, each accompanied by brief guidelines. Organisations may find it helpful to use the knowledge and expertise of their staff and/or volunteers to decide how best the issue raised by each of the principles should be addressed, and the appropriate action be taken, in the light of their circumstances and structures, and the nature of their activities. Some principles may be difficult to apply directly or may require adaptation in the light of local circumstances.

BACKGROUND

In considering this code of practice, it may be useful to voluntary organisations to know something of the background which has led to its production. In 1986 local authority social services and education departments were granted access to the criminal records of prospective paid staff and volunteers as a means of protection of the children with whom they were to

work. Since then, the number of people whose criminal record has been checked has grown rapidly, as has the range of statutory bodies empowered to make such checks.

Mindful of the fact that local authority child care and youth organisations were conducting checks but that voluntary organisations operating very similar services were not, the Home Office set up a working party. In 1989 three schemes were established to enable voluntary organisations to access police records on a pilot basis.

The Home Office engaged Dr Judith Unell to monitor the work of the pilots and to conduct research into their effect on child abuse, and on the voluntary organisations and their volunteers. Dr Unell's findings were published by The Volunteer Centre UK as "Criminal Record Checks within the Voluntary Sector: An Evaluation of the Pilot Schemes".

Dr Unell found no evidence that the widespread extension of access to criminal records by voluntary organisations would prevent the abuse of children. She went on to recommend that a code of practice for the protection of children be produced. The Home Office working party accepted that recommendation and this code of practice is the result.

Since then, the two local pilot schemes in Dudley and Lancashire have ended. The national pilot, the Voluntary Organisations Consultancy Service, has been enabled to continue, but offering checks to a limited number of national organisations only for paid staff and volunteers working with children in highly vulnerable or isolated settings. The address of the Consultancy Service is given at the back of this booklet.

The media have reported very fully recent instances and allegations of the abuse of children by organised and persistent paedophile rings. Although such cases are thankfully still comparatively rare, parents and guardians must be vigilant in ensuring that they give their children into the charge of only those who merit that trust. We hope that this code of practice will support voluntary organisations and help them to reassure the community that they are taking all reasonable steps to safeguard the welfare of the children with whom they work.

(Signed The Rt Hon The Earl Ferrers)

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Minister of State Home Office

(Signed Tim Boswell)

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3. Managing the Organisation in Order to Protect Children

Safeguarding the welfare of children ought not to be seen by voluntary organisations as an optional activity which can be added to the programme. Protection from abuse should become an integral part of the policy and practice of all organisations working with children.

GUIDELINE 1: ADOPT A POLICY STATEMENT ON SAFEGUARDING THE WELFARE OF CHILDREN

Most voluntary organisations recognise that good management requires that everyone is clear about what they are trying to achieve, and that they agree aims and policy statements for that purpose.

Every voluntary organisation should consider whether to adopt a brief written statement setting out its policy on safeguarding the welfare of the children with whom it works. This policy should state clearly the duty of all those employed by or involved in the organisation to prevent the physical, sexual or emotional abuse of all children with whom they come into contact.

Any such policy statement should be brought to the attention of all existing and new paid staff and volunteers, who should also be informed of any guidelines or training which will enable them to implement the policy statement. There may be some advantage in this being part of a broader policy statement on safeguarding the safety and welfare of children in the organisation.

GUIDELINE 2: PLAN THE WORK OF THE ORGANISATION SO AS TO MINIMISE SITUATIONS WHERE THE ABUSE OF CHILDREN MAY OCCUR

The number of people who are actively seeking to harm or abuse children is probably quite small, and organisations can use the principles in this code to reduce their opportunities for access to children. But there are also people with no record as abusers who offend against children when tempted by finding themselves alone with a child in an isolated setting.

To combat this, voluntary organisations should plan their work so as to reduce to the minimum those situations where it may be possible for children to be abused.

Organisations may be able to reduce opportunities for abuse by the way they use premises. For example, asking children to reach an organisation's premises by walking along a dark, unsupervised path is offering an unnecessary opportunity to potential abusers. Or it may be possible to arrange that activities which involve a single child working with an adult take place in a room which can be observed easily by others in nearby areas, even if this is achieved simply by leaving doors open.

Organisations can also reduce opportunities for abuse by reducing to the minimum occasions where a single adult is in the company of a lone child and where there is little or no possibility

of the activity being supervised or observed by others.

One way of achieving this would be for organisations to issue guidelines recommending staff or volunteers, whenever possible, not to meet with children away from the organisation's base or meeting place without a parent or other adult being present.

Our society now considers it desirable that a male doctor should have a nurse present when examining a female patient. It reassures the patient and protects the doctor from both wrongful accusation and temptation. We should view the need for safe-guards in adult/child relationships in a similar way.

It may not be possible for certain organisations to operate effectively without adults working with individual children or young people in unsupervised settings. For example, schemes for befriending disadvantaged young people under 16 years old may have one-to-one contact as their main method of work.

If organisations operate in these ways, they must recognise the risk they take should they inadvertently place a potential abuser in a paid or voluntary post involving contact with children. Organisations should take every step possible to assure themselves that people in such high risk positions have no record of, nor potential to abuse. This may involve an even more thorough interview, the taking of extra references (see Guideline 8) and very close supervision. Where the service is available to them, organisations should check the criminal records of prospective paid staff or volunteers before appointment to such high risk posts.

GUIDELINE 3: INTRODUCE A SYSTEM WHEREBY CHILDREN MAY TALK WITH AN INDEPENDENT PERSON

Sadly, it is a common feature of situations where children have been abused that an adult has exploited the power that they have over a child to gain submission or silence. Some of this power derives from the superior physical strength of the adult, but it also stems from the power relationship inherent in the situation.

In most voluntary organisations working with children, the adults make the majority of the important decisions and thereby have most of the power. If potential abusers are attracted to voluntary child care and youth organisations, it is probably the potential for exploiting this unequal power relationship which draws them.

In recent years a number of organisations have sought to give more rights and power to the children with whom they work. Youth organisations have collectively adopted empowerment as one of their central aims, and child care organisations have tried to increase the rights and choices of service users. Giving power to children also has the important side effect of reducing the potential for undiscovered abuse.

Voluntary organisations may wish to build on existing and new programmes for increasing the rights of children by introducing systems for children to make representations to independent persons. Children might, for example, be given the opportunity to talk with a person independent of their club, group or residential home should they feel that they have been physically, sexually or emotionally abused by an adult or by another child.

Many child care organisations will have already adopted the detailed representations and "independent person" arrangements set out in the guidance to the 1989 Children Act. In non-residential settings the procedure for making representations need not be quite so formal. It might simply involve explaining to any child who comes into contact with an organisation for more than just the odd occasion their right to talk with an independent person, and then giving them the name and contact arrangements. If this were to form part of a more general membership or registration process and were linked to explaining the other rights and responsibilities the child may have within the organisation, it need not be threatening.

For smaller, local organisations it may be possible to persuade a respected figure in the community, who has demonstrated their trustworthiness, to undertake this task. Whereas in larger organisations a specially designated staff member or volunteer may be an appropriate choice. In all cases, the independent person must be given clear, written guidelines as to what immediate action to take to stop any abuse disclosed by a child, otherwise they might unwittingly permit the abuse to continue. The guidelines should then refer to the organisation's standard procedures for dealing with the disclosure of abuse (see Guideline 12).

Organisations may wish to extend access to the independent person to include junior staff and volunteers. It is possible for them to observe a superior acting suspiciously and not know how to deal with the situation. Guidance on how and with whom they should show their concern should form part of their induction training.

4. Managing Paid Staff and Volunteers in Order to Protect Children

Although the opportunities for abuse can be reduced to the minimum by the management of the organisation and the buildings it uses, it is through the good management of paid staff and volunteers that voluntary organisations can be most effective in protecting children.

GUIDELINE 4: APPLY AGREED PROCEDURES FOR PROTECTING CHILDREN TO ALL PAID STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS

There is no certain way of identifying a would-be-abuser. There is always the risk that, with the right circumstances and temptations, an adult in a voluntary organisation in contact with children might abuse for the first time. Fortunately, the proportion who do offend is small. But organisations must not let that fact lull them into a false sense of security.

Voluntary organisations should, of course, take all reasonable and available steps to exclude known abusers, and guidelines on this follow in Chapter 5. But since it is not safe to assume that anyone can automatically be excluded from being a potential abuser, any procedures set in place within organisations for the protection of children should apply to all paid staff and volunteers. This is not the same as treating each person working with children as being under suspicion, which might severely affect recruitment. Instead it involves taking sensible steps to protect children from abuse, which are then observed by all.

Guideline 2 sets out the need to plan the work of the organisation as a whole so as to reduce opportunities for abuse. Similarly, organisations should plan the work of each staff member,

be they paid or voluntary, so as to minimise situations where they might be tempted or able to abuse.

GUIDELINE 5: GIVE ALL PAID STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS CLEAR ROLES

The abuse of children is most easily concealed, and therefore perpetuated, where there is confusion amongst adults over roles, responsibilities and accountability. Although most paid staff now receive a job description from their employers, few volunteers receive a written outline of what is expected from them. And job descriptions do not always spell out clearly enough responsibilities for the protection of children.

Each paid member of staff or volunteer who comes into contact with children through a voluntary organisation should have a clear idea of their role. One way is to provide each one with a written description of the work they are expected to do. This might include, amongst other things:

- the person to whom they will be accountable for their work, their line manager or supervisor;
- the person(s) whose work they will supervise (if any);
- a description of the work they will undertake with children, with reference to any relevant guidelines produced by the organisation for safeguarding the welfare of those children;
- the duty to prevent the abuse of all children in contact with the organisation, and reference to the action to be taken if abuse is discovered or disclosed. (See Guideline 12).

Where organisations choose to work non-hierarchically, such as in workers' co-operatives or in groups of informal voluntary carers, the need for clear roles and accountability is not reduced. It is still possible to introduce ways of describing, monitoring and supervising tasks and responsibilities in such settings.

The job descriptions of paid staff must observe employment law, but the outline of a volunteer's work need not be complicated. A short list of tasks and responsibilities in addition to the above information will be enough. The volunteer, the person to whom they are accountable and the organisation should each retain a copy. Job descriptions and outlines of work should be reviewed on a regular basis and whenever the tasks change significantly.

Organisations can use the process of writing and revising job descriptions as an opportunity to implement their policy statement on safeguarding the welfare of children. (see Guidelines 1 and 2).

GUIDELINE 6: USE SUPERVISION AS A MEANS OF PROTECTING CHILDREN

The previous guideline stated the need for clear lines of accountability as a means of child protection. Organisations should ensure that those directly responsible for paid or volunteer staff in contact with children, the line managers or supervisors, use good management supervision to prevent and/or detect abuse.

It is recommended that supervisors meet each paid or volunteer staff member for whom they

are responsible on a regular basis to review and plan their work. On each occasion the supervisor might ask questions about the staff member's working and personal relationships with the children with whom they come into contact.

There is still discussion as to what are the detectable signs of an abusing relationship. However, if any child appears to be receiving exceptional treatment, either being highly favoured or being treated unduly harshly, the supervisor should explore the relationship further with the paid or volunteer staff member. If the supervisor is not convinced by talking with the staff member that the child's welfare is secure, s/he should talk confidentially with other staff or volunteers and with the child concerned. The supervisor should not drop the issue until s/he is reassured that there is no possibility of abuse.

Supervisors should also take or create opportunities for observing the member of staff whilst s/he is working with children.

Ideally, supervisors should keep a brief written record of each supervision meeting and of any things of note which are observed.

Good supervision is a useful way for an organisation to ensure that all its paid staff and volunteers are working effectively and for staff members to gain the most from their paid or voluntary work. The prevention of abuse should be seen as one part of that process.

5. Choosing the Right Paid Staff and Volunteers in Order to Protect Children

The single most effective point at which an organisation can use good management to minimise the possibility of abuse is when new paid staff or volunteers are appointed, although it is important to ensure that vigilance is maintained thereafter.

GUIDELINE 7: TREAT ALL WOULD-BE PAID STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS AS JOB APPLICANTS FOR ANY POSITION INVOLVING CONTACT WITH CHILDREN

Most people have never knowingly met or seen a child abuser. This may lead us to imagine that anyone capable of such appalling acts must appear and behave very differently from the rest of society. We may persuade ourselves that no-one we know could ever abuse a child. Yet it is likely that most of us will know or meet at least one abuser during our lives, probably without being aware of it.

Voluntary organisations cannot rely on the fact that a person is known to an existing member of staff or volunteer as evidence that they are not a potential abuser. Even a person transferring room working in a part of the organisation not involving contact with children to a part which does should be treated in the same way in this respect as a total stranger.

Voluntary organisations should consider treating all people wishing to take up paid or voluntary work involving contact with children as applications for a post. It is recommended

that they should be asked to sign an application form giving, amongst other things:

- their full name, current and recent addresses and date of birth;
- details of previous experience, voluntary or paid, of working with children, if any;
- permission to contact, in writing and in person, at least one person who has experience of their work or contact with children and who may be asked for a reference (see Guideline 8);
- details of any convictions for criminal offences against children, including any 'spent' convictions under the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974;
- in appropriate cases (see Guideline 10), permission to check for any police criminal record.

For paid posts this information would form part of the normal application form. Organisations may be more flexible when dealing with volunteers. Some may willingly complete a short form when seeking to volunteer. With others it may be best for the person recruiting them to gain the information through an informal interview, complete the form and then ask the would-be volunteer to check and sign it. In every case, however, it is advisable for the organisation to strive to gain at least the above basic information.

The fact that an applicant has no previous experience of working with children may not be relevant. There are some paid posts where the person may come into regular contact with children but where that is incidental to the main tasks; for example mini-bus drivers. And many new volunteers may be wanting to work with children for the first time. However, organisations should still seek information about any setting where the applicant has had regular contact outside their own home with children, including informal volunteering, such as babysitting.

GUIDELINE 8: GAIN AT LEAST ONE REFERENCE FROM A PERSON WHO HAS EXPERIENCE OF THE APPLICANT'S PAID WORK OR VOLUNTEERING WITH CHILDREN

Before the appointment of any applicant for a paid or voluntary position is confirmed, organisations should consider writing to at least one person who has first-hand experience of his/her work or voluntary contact with children to seek a reference. Where an applicant has no experience of paid or voluntary work with children, a reference may be sought from a reputable person who can comment on the applicant's character and relationships with others.

When writing to a referee, the organisation should state explicitly that the applicant is being considered for a position which involves paid or voluntary work with children and/or young people, and seek views on their suitability for such work. Organisations might also send any job description or written outline of the work to inform the referee's judgement.

The references provided may sometimes be vague or ambiguous. This may be due to haste or the use of colloquial English, but it could also be the referee trying to give a coded message. If anything in a reference causes the organisation to have any doubts about the applicant's suitability to work with children, the referee should be contacted in person or by telephone to discuss the matter further.

Organisations ought to be clear, however, as to what might constitute an acceptable reference

for any post. A referee might imply that an applicant is a gay man or lesbian woman, or have information about some minor financial misdemeanour. These matters are not relevant to the prevention of abuse. Organisations must use any information gathered in this way carefully and avoid unfair or unlawful discrimination. Organisations should refer to their equal opportunities policy for guidance if they have one, or consider developing one if not.

GUIDELINE 9: EXPLORE ALL APPLICANTS' EXPERIENCE OF WORKING OR CONTACT WITH CHILDREN IN AN INTERVIEW BEFORE APPOINTMENT

It is common practice for voluntary organisations to interview applicants for paid posts before appointment, usually to ascertain their skills and experience as an aid to selection. Organisations can also use these interviews to explore the applicant's experience of working or contact with children as a means of preventing abuse. Organisations should arrange to interview all prospective volunteers to explore similar issues.

One of more interviewers should ask applicants about their working, voluntary and personal relationships with children, using the information given in the written application. Applicants may also be asked about their ability and commitment to fulfil the duty to prevent the abuse of children set out in the job description or outline of tasks (see Guideline 5).

Should anything in an applicant's responses leave the interviewer(s) in any doubt as to his/her suitability to work with children, then these areas of uncertainty should be explored further through searching follow-up questions.

Again, organisations will need to use information gained in this way only to prevent the abuse of children, applying the principles of equality of opportunity and adhering to their own policy.

At least one, or in some cases the only, interviewer should have sound experience of work with children in the organisation, and preferably should also have received training in interviewing applicants for work with children.

Where an organisation remains uncertain about an applicant's ability or commitment to prevent abuse, this should be a prime factor to be considered before an appointment is made. In the case of a volunteer, it may be possible for the organisation to appoint such an applicant to a position which involves no opportunities for contact with children.

Finally, at some point before or immediately following the interview, the organisation may wish to seek to see some form of identification which gives the applicant's full name, date of birth and current address together with his/her signature or photograph; for example a driving licence or passport. This should be compared against the written application form to ensure that the applicant is not assuming a false identity.

GUIDELINE 10: FIND OUT WHETHER AN APPLICANT HAS ANY CONVICTION FOR CRIMINAL OFFENCES AGAINST CHILDREN

The evidence from the police and child protection agencies is that only a small percentage of incidents of abuse against children is reported and, of these, only a proportion result in the conviction of the abuser. This means that trying to ascertain whether or not an applicant has

any conviction for offences against children is not the most efficient way to prevent abuse. Yet convicted abusers have admitted that they constantly seek new opportunities to abuse. So organisations must take reasonable steps to safeguard children from their attentions.

In the written application (see Guideline 7), organisations should seek to gain information from all applicants for paid or voluntary work about any previous convictions for criminal offences against children. Applicants should be told clearly, preferably in writing, that the positions for which they are applying involve work or contact with children and are therefore exempt from the provisions of the Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974. All convictions, however old, must be declared. Applicants should be assured that this information will be dealt with confidentially, and will not be used to discriminate against them unfairly.

Of course, a determined convicted abuser may well tell a lie. Which is why organisations should decide to combine this request with a thorough interview and the seeking of at least one written reference. As a part of any interview, organisations are advised to ask applicants for paid posts to explain any apparent lapses in their employment record, as these might be periods when a convicted abuser was serving a jail sentence. Where a volunteer appears to have moved from one voluntary group to another on a number of occasions, organisations should find out whether there is good reason for this.

Voluntary organisations in England and Wales should also check the names of prospective paid staff and volunteers against information held by the Department of Health Consultancy Service dealing with people who have worked in child care, and the Department for Education List 99 which deals with people who have worked in education or youth work. Both may be consulted through the Department of Health contact address given at the end of this booklet.

Currently, within the voluntary sector, access to information about the criminal background of applicants is available from the police only to certain national voluntary organisations through the Voluntary Organisations Consultancy Service (VOCS). If a voluntary organisation which is not a member of the VOCS scheme is offered access to an applicant's criminal record through any other route, they should discuss it with F2 Division of the Home Office.

Those organisations which are members of the VOCS scheme may only gain access to police information about applicants for paid or voluntary posts working with children in highly vulnerable or isolated settings, where supervision of the adult is not possible.

Contact addresses for the above departments and agencies are given at the end of this booklet.

Voluntary organisations must take great care over how they seek and use information about convictions for offences. A substantial minority of people in the community have been convicted for offences which have no relevance to their ability of suitability to work with children. Home Office statistics show that certain groups, for example, young black men, and young men from inner city areas are over-represented among people convicted of minor crimes. Organisations should not seek to deter such groups in general from applying to work with children and young people. Indeed, some organisations may wish to promote the involvement of these groups or ex-offenders in pursuit of their equal opportunities policies, or because the experience of these people may be valuable in their work with children and young people.

Organisations should reassure applicants that information which they disclose about their criminal background is only required to prevent the abuse of children, will not be used for other purposes, and will be treated in the strictest confidence. Steps should then be taken to ensure that this commitment is carried out.

Dr Judith Unell's research into three pilot projects permitting voluntary organisations to gain access to criminal records found that vetting was a partial, imperfect and costly means of protecting children. Although information about convictions for offences against children cannot be ignored, organisations should not depend on applicants or any other authority disclosing such information as their main or only means of preventing abuse.

GUIDELINE 11: MAKE PAID AND VOLUNTARY APPOINTMENTS CONDITIONAL ON THE SUCCESSFUL COMPLETION OF A PROBATIONARY PERIOD

Having been reassured by appropriate procedures such as a written application, reference(s), interview and, where appropriate and available, criminal record check that an applicant has the ability and commitment to prevent the abuse of children, organisations should not relax their vigilance. Organisations should consider making the appointment of both paid staff and volunteers conditional upon the successful completion of a probationary period.

The length of a probationary period will vary dependent on the type of position and whether it is full-time or for a few hours per week, but will normally be between 3 months and 1 year. A firm date for the review of a probationary period should be set on appointment.

The probationary period may coincide with the time during which a new paid or voluntary staff member is given induction and training in the skills and knowledge needed to perform the work. But its main purpose in respect of this code of practice is to enable an organisation to monitor the work of the staff member in order to be assured that s/he is not a potential abuser of children.

On appointment, the new paid or voluntary staff member should be given details of a probationary period and its purpose, the date for its review, together with any details of induction and/or training.

Some positions, for example voluntary helpers on holiday playschemes or paid staff on temporary contracts, may involve appointments which are shorter than a reasonable probationary period. In these situations, paid or volunteer staff should be supervised as if they were undertaking a probationary period.

During the probationary period, it is advisable for the line manager or supervisor to hold supervision meetings on a more frequent basis than normal (see Guideline 6), and to take special steps to observe the work of the new staff member regularly, both by prior arrangement and otherwise.

On the set date the supervisor should meet with the new staff member to review his/her performance. The supervisor should use notes from supervision meetings and observations made during the probationary period to inform the discussion.

There should be no assumption that a paid or volunteer staff member has automatically completed the probationary period successfully by merely surviving the post until the review date. The supervisor must have no doubt as to the staff member's ability and commitment to prevent the abuse of children, as set out in the job description or outline of tasks, before confirming the successful completion of the probationary period.

6. Dealing with Abuse which has been disclosed or discovered

Workers in voluntary organisations may gain the trust of children and young people to such an extent that it is to them that a child turns when wanting to share unhappiness about being abused, whether within the organisation, at home or elsewhere. Many workers may not know how to deal with this disclosure.

GUIDELINE 12: ISSUE GUIDELINES ON HOW TO DEAL WITH THE DISCLOSURE OR DISCOVERY OF ABUSE

Organisations are advised to prepare and issue to all paid and volunteer staff brief written guidelines setting out the steps they must take if a child discloses details of abuse to them, or if they discover evidence that abuse has taken place.

The guidelines should contain:

- a reminder of the staff member's duty to prevent abuse, including the duty to report any abuse discovered or suspected;
- guidance on what constitutes abuse and how to recognise it;
- specific instructions as to who to inform if abuse is disclosed or discovered;
- the name and contact address/number of the independent person, should it be suspected that the abuser is a superior in the organisation (see Guideline 3); or the agencies which have the statutory responsibility to investigate, namely the Social Services or the Police.
- Some indication as to what might happen when they report the abuse;
- Guidance on how to support the abused child.

Local voluntary organisation should seek guidance from their Social Services Department's Child Protection Team in drawing up these guidelines, if they are in any doubt as to the detail.

7 Training

Effective protection of children requires action by the paid staff and volunteers of voluntary organisations, together with their line managers or supervisors and policy makers. It requires particular skills and knowledge. Some they may have already, and some they may see as nothing more than good common sense. But other skills and knowledge may have to be acquired.

GUIDELINE 13: TRAIN PAID STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS, THEIR LINE MANAGERS OR SUPERVISORS AND POLICY MAKERS IN THE PREVENTION OF CHILD ABUSE

Larger voluntary organisations will usually have an ongoing training programme which may be readily adapted to provide training in the prevention of child abuse alongside, or as a part of, other elements. Smaller organisations may be able to look to umbrella and networking bodies, or to those funding departments of local authorities who already provide training, to amend their programmes to include training in the prevention of abuse, and what immediate action to take when abuse occurs.

Organisations may wish to consider how to meet the training needs of their personnel in the following:

- planning the work of the organisation to prevent abuse;
- becoming an "independent person" to whom children may make representations;
- using supervision as a means of protecting children;
- interviewing applicants for positions involving work with children;
- dealing with abuse which has been disclosed or discovered.

The need for training should not be ignored. Giving staff instructions and guidelines without equipping them with the skills and knowledge for implementation is not an effective means of child protection.

8. Useful Publications

"Criminal Record Checks Within the Voluntary Sector. An Evaluation of the Pilot Schemes." By Dr Judith Unell.

The Volunteer Centre UK.

The report of the research into the effectiveness of the national and two local pilot projects which extended access to criminal record checks to voluntary organisations.

"Home Office Circular No. 117/92: Protection of Children: Disclosure of Criminal Background to Voluntary Sector Organisations."

Home Office.

The circular which sets out current arrangements whereby some national organisations may gain access to criminal record checks.

"Making the Right Choice" by Angela Whitcher

The Volunteer Centre UK.

A booklet setting out useful advice on recruiting volunteers.

"Voluntary But Not Amateur" by London Voluntary Service Council.

Directory of Social Change.

Contains a section on voluntary organisations employing paid staff.

"Choosing With Care". The Report of the Warner Inquiry.

HMSO.

Recommends action to protect children in residential child care establishments, including improved selection procedures when appointing staff.

"Employing People. The ACAS handbook for small firms."

ACAS.

A simple guide to the law and good practice in employing paid staff which may be useful for small voluntary organisations.

"Working Together"

HMSO

A guide to arrangements for interagency co-operation for the protection of children from abuse.

9. Contact Addresses

Department of Health

CS2B
Room 133
Department of Health
Wellington House
133-155 Waterloo Road
London
SE1 8UG

For general enquiries in connection with this Code.

Department of Health Consultancy Service

Room 133
Department of Health
Wellington House
133-155 Waterloo Road

London
SE1 8UG

Holds lists against which the names of prospective staff may be checked. See Guideline 10.

Home Office

F2 Division
Room 531
50 Queen Anne's Gate
London
SW1H 9AT

The part of the Home Office which deals with the disclosure of criminal background.

The Volunteer Centre UK

29 Lower King's Road
Berkhamsted
Hertfordshire
HP4 2AB

Provides information, training and support to people who work with volunteers.

Voluntary Organisations Consultancy Service

Unit 4
Pride Court
80/82 White Lion Street
London
N1 9PF

Makes criminal record checks for some national voluntary organisations which work with children. See Guideline 10.

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