

Safeguarding children and young people who may be affected by gang activity

Department for Children, Schools and Families

A response from the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS)

June 2009

Introduction

1. The National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) is the independent voice of the voluntary youth sector in England. A diverse network of over 170 national voluntary youth organisations and regional and local youth networks, NCVYS has been working since 1936 to raise the profile of youth work, share good practice and influence policy that has an impact on young people and the organisations that support them.
2. The NCVYS network reflects the diverse range of voluntary organisations working with young people at community, local, regional and national level. Most of our members offer opportunities to engage in challenging activities or develop creative talents. They also support young people to become active in their communities and offer opportunities for their voice to be heard. Some offer interventions to prevent or tackle specific issues such as homelessness or offending behaviour. Others offer counselling, advice, Guidance and information. All contribute to young people's personal and social development; some also engage with spiritual development.
3. For more information on any element of this paper, please contact NCVYS's Policy Officer, Hannah Dobbin on 020 7278 1041.

Introduction

4. The National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Department for Children, Schools and Families' (DCSF) consultation *Safeguarding children and young people who may be affected by gang activity*. This response highlights issues that are particularly relevant to the voluntary and community youth sector (VCYS).
5. This response crosses over with previous NCVYS work around safeguarding, including a response to HM Government's *Together we can end violence against women and girls*¹ and a submission to the Lord Laming inquiry².
6. This response has been endorsed by Children England³.

Key recommendations

7. Key recommendations emerging from the NCVYS response are:

Recommendation 1: Voluntary and community youth sector representation on local strategic bodies, possibly through local infrastructure organisations, is necessary to ensure a joined-up, holistic approach to safeguarding children and young people who may be affected by gang activity.

Recommendation 2: Local Safeguarding Children's Boards should engage a diverse range of young people in policy and decision-making. NCVYS's principles of youth participation should be followed⁴.

Recommendation 3: Further guidance is needed to ensure that Local Safeguarding Children's Boards make training available and accessible to voluntary and community youth sector paid workers and volunteers.

Recommendation 4: Solutions to safeguard children who may be affected by gang activity must take a 'think family' approach which considers the needs of parents, families and carers as well as the needs of children and young people. This should operate in conjunction with support through individual interventions.

Recommendation 5: Government and local strategic bodies should utilise and support the development of resources produced by the voluntary and community youth sector to strengthen local partnership, in particular small voluntary and community youth sector organisations.

Recommendation 6: Organisations from all sectors need to be supported to develop safeguarding procedures, for example through NCVYS's Keeping it Safe standards and Sound Systems accreditation scheme.

Recommendation 7: The guidance should be made more accessible and relevant to the voluntary and community youth sector by providing more direction for the sector on how to engage with local strategic bodies, such as Local Safeguarding Children's Boards. Case studies demonstrating good cross-sector partnerships are suggested as a means of sharing practice and making the guidance more relevant to a wider range of practitioners working with young people, including those in the voluntary and community youth sector.

¹ NCVYS's response to HM Government's *Together we can end violence against women and girls* is available via: <http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=273>

² NCVYS's submission to the Lord Laming inquiry is available to download via: <http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=270>

³ Further information on Children England is available via: <http://www.childrenengland.org.uk>

⁴ NCVYS's Principles of youth participation are available via: <http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=269>

The role of Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCBs)

8. DCSF's proposed guidance states that 'addressing the problem of gang involvement is a multi-agency issue. Partnership working and information sharing will be key to safeguarding young people'. To ensure a joined-up, holistic approach VCYS representation on LSCBs, and all other local strategic bodies such as Children's Trusts, is necessary. To ensure consistency in representation of the VCYS on local strategic bodies, local voluntary and community sector infrastructure organisations, as entities which represent the local third sector, should be encouraged to participate and contribute to an effective mechanism for sharing relevant information within their own sector. This will help to build awareness about developments in planning of local priorities which can impact on the sector.
9. The role of the VCYS in working with young people at risk or affected by violence and gang activity needs to be more strongly acknowledged in this section of the guidance with greater clarity about the role, responsibilities and relationships between all frontline agencies working with young people in this context. Cross-sector working is important in helping all agencies to understand which services are working with particular young people or groups of young people in a local area.
10. Effective information sharing will help create greater awareness at a local level of the factors that make gang activity more likely. In turn this should facilitate the development of early intervention strategies to tackle the problems before they advance.

Recommendation 1: VCYS representation on local strategic bodies, possibly through local infrastructure organisations, is necessary to ensure a joined-up, holistic approach to safeguarding children and young people who may be affected by gang activity.

11. The suggestion to involve young people, in building intelligence on gangs is supported. The VCYS is a key source of support here as a sector which often works with and supports the most disadvantaged and disengaged young people. It is important that LSCB's recognise this and engage with VCYS organisations to involve young people in policy and decision-making and identifying appropriate solutions and support. Furthermore, former gang members may have set up, or be involved with, local VCYS organisations. LSCB engagement with former gang members could provide valuable evidence and context to inform local decision-making. NCVYS's Young Partners *Principles of youth participation* may be a useful resource for LSCBs.

Recommendation 2: LSCBs should engage a diverse range of young people in policy and decision-making. NCVYS's principles of youth participation should be followed⁵.

12. As highlighted in the guidance, LSCBs are responsible for ensuring that training is provided to meet local need. Therefore, it is essential that training provided is accessible for VCYS paid workers and volunteers, particularly if the sector is to be empowered and engaged to meaningfully engage in local partnerships. Further guidance for LSCBs, and other strategic bodies, would be useful to demonstrate ways of making the training accessible, for example evening training sessions would allow volunteers to attend after their normal working hours. Financial support could also be offered to support volunteers to attend, for example by covering travel costs.

Recommendation 3: Further guidance is needed to ensure that LSCBs make training available and accessible to voluntary and community youth sector paid workers and volunteers.

⁵ NCVYS's Principles of youth participation are available via: <http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=269>

13. Overall the proposed guidance is clear on the role of LSCBs, however the difficulty will be ensuring consistency of practice at a local level and the meaningful engagement of VCYS organisations and young people in policy and decision-making.

Referrals

14. Through previous consultation with its members for a submission to the Lord Laming review (December 2008), NCVYS found that local providers of voluntary and community services to children and young people were not always clear about which avenues should be used for reporting serious cases. For example, consultation with members operating youth clubs across England revealed that many VCS organisations particularly those operating in counties (with the exception of Young Suffolk) did not know who to refer their concerns to. Common practice where this occurred was to use the Police as the primary referral agency as there was no other clear route to report concerns. Interestingly one response to our consultation stated:

....it is difficult to establish who a local lead professional might be for any one child so often reports are made to people with the hope that the information gets to the right person.

15. The VCYS needs to be kept up-to-date with developments around referrals and the guidance is useful for the sector to understand how LA social workers are being advised to work. The need for information sharing extends to other safeguarding initiatives, such as the Common Assessment Framework and ContactPoint, as it is vital that all people working with children and young people are aware of and engaged with the latest rules, regulations and practices⁶.
16. To ensure consistency in practice and encourage joined-up working, Osman Warnings (a warning regardign threat to life) should automatically trigger a referral to LA children's social care departments.

Supporting families and communities

17. It is important that safeguarding children who may be affected by gang activity is seen as part of the wider agenda around families. For example, family services are key in intervening in families where there is known gang activity. All members of the family need to be supported when tackling gang-related violence, in particular the needs of younger siblings should be addressed to prevent them being drawn into gang activity⁷. Support for parents is also needed through local, accessible and available parenting programmes to build resilience factors into family life.
18. As the guidance highlights, family-based interventions should be used alongside targeted interventions wuch as youth projects and peer mentoring which are often most effectiely delivered by voluntary and community sector organisations.

Recommendation 4: Solutions to safeguard children who may be affected by gang activity must take a 'think family' approach which considers the needs of parents, families and carers as well as the needs of children and young people. This should operate in conjunction with support through individual interventions.

⁶ Further recommendations around the youth justice system are included in the NCVYS and Children England Speaking Out briefing on the *Youth Crime Action Plan* available via: <http://ncvys.org.uk/index.php?alias=soycapbriefing>

⁷ A 'think family' approach was recommended in response to youth crime as part of a Speaking Out report *Gang, gun and knife crime: seeking solutions* available via: <http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=568>

19. Explicit links need to be made in the guidance between girls who have been victimised/abused at home and their entry into gang activity as signalling a need to belong, be 'protected' and as an assertion of independence. Services and programmes need to be offered that give support, independence and a sense of belonging to avoid gang culture.
20. There is a need for more emphasis in the guidance of the importance of empowering communities to challenge gang behaviour and tackle the culture of fear. For example greater support in revitalising social housing and providing more employment opportunities.

VCYS roles and responsibilities

21. The guidance highlights the importance of the voluntary and community sector in working with young people and providing local knowledge to inform policymaking. This is welcomed, however it would be useful to include further guidance for the VCYS explaining possible routes of engagement with local strategic bodies. At a local level, there is an onus on both statutory and voluntary organisations to be aware of what is going on in their areas and pursue relationship building and information sharing. Communication between LAs and VCYS local infrastructure organisations could be a valuable route to understanding the local make-up and facilitating joined-up working.
22. As highlighted in NCVYS's previous responses to Statutory Guidance and Children's Trusts consultations⁸, NCVYS recognises that the VCYS has a responsibility to proactively engage with local structures such as Children's Trusts. To this end the Community Sector Partnership for Children and Young People (2006) produced two documents⁹. The first, *talking trusts*, is aimed at statutory agencies and sets out straightforward recommendations encouraging Children's Trusts to do more to engage with voluntary and community sector partners, especially small organisations who are doing critical work with children or young people on the ground. The second, *Community Involvement in Children's Trusts – Unlock your potential*, is a counterpart document offering guidance for community and voluntary organisations delivering services to children or young people on how to engage effectively with children's trusts. Although these two publications focus on Children's Trusts, the principles can be applied to deliver stronger partnerships at other local strategic bodies such as LSCBs.
23. Such resources need to be recognised and supported by Government in order develop communication and understanding between sectors. Resources produced by the VCYS might also be more likely than Government publications to reach small voluntary organisations who are vital service deliverers and able to represent often the most hard to reach young people.

Recommendation 5: Government and local strategic bodies should utilise and support the development of resources produced by the VCYS to strengthen local partnership, in particular small VCYS organisations.

24. All organisations that work with children and young people need to be supported in developing safeguarding procedures. To this end NCVYS has developed Keeping it Safe, a good practice guide and Sound Systems¹⁰, a peer accreditation scheme aimed at voluntary youth organisations. Keeping it Safe has received endorsements from DCSF, the NSPCC and other key stakeholders and is a good example of how the VCYS can lead the way in safeguarding work. Through LSCBs, the VCYS could work in partnership with LAs and organisations outside of the VCYS to develop safeguarding in all sectors.

⁸ NCVYS consultation responses are available via: <http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=273>

⁹ The *talking trust* documents are available via: <http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=368#ttrusts>

¹⁰ Further information on Keeping it Safe and Sound Systems is available via: <http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=262>

Recommendation 6: Organisations from all sectors need to be supported to develop safeguarding procedures, for example through NCVYS's Keeping it Safe standards and Sound Systems accreditation scheme.

Language used and accessibility to the VCYS

25. It is useful that the guidance offers a definition of gangs and makes the distinction between organised gangs, for whom crime and violence are a core part of their identity, and being part of a friendship group of young people who have gathered together in public to socialise. It is important that the discourse around young people and gangs is clarified and challenged as young people can often be discriminated against and labelled for behavior that used to be acceptable within society, e.g. hanging out with friends in the park.
26. The guidance is aimed at those who work in voluntary and statutory services across the children's workforce whose work brings them into contact with children and young people. The language and style may put off people that work or volunteer for VCYS organisations as they may perceive it to be written for statutory agencies. Furthermore, the simple fact that it is produced by central Government may give the impression that the guidance is for LA workers, not all those who work with children and young people. Although the voluntary and community sector is mentioned, it is in recommendations to LSCBs and LA structures around who to engage with, the guidance is not written from the perspective of the sector or young people trying to engage with local strategic arrangements. Workers and volunteers within the VCYS may also think that the guidance is not directed at them as many do not specifically focus on gangs as part of their work, although it is often an indirect influence or problem.
27. To encourage VCYS engagement, the guidance may benefit from a case study that demonstrates joined-up working between sectors, not just within local statutory structures. NCVYS's submission to the Lord Laming review included several case studies demonstrating integrated working and support for the VCYS, such as Youth Focus (Buckinghamshire Council for Voluntary Youth Services) as detailed on the next page.

Recommendation 7: The guidance should be made more accessible and relevant to the VCYS by providing more direction for the sector on how to engage with local strategic bodies, such as LSCBs. Case studies demonstrating good cross-sector partnerships are suggested as a means of sharing practice and making the guidance more relevant to a wider range of practitioners working with young people, including those in the VCYS.

Youth Focus (Buckinghamshire Council for Voluntary Youth Services)

Buckinghamshire Council for Voluntary Youth Services (CVYS) has strong representation through the Children and Young People's Trust and sub-committees to the local LSCB. Training is prioritised for local voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations working with children and young people for example through a safe recruitment conference and a partnership project to train and support Child Protection Advisors from voluntary organisations.

Inter-agency governance is strong and is facilitated through a council funded VCS link officer and Youth Focus has been able to contribute to local delivery programmes for example, ContactPoint, workforce development, commissioning arrangements and setting up of the family information service.

Integrated processes are supported through regular training across a range of child protection and safeguarding areas together with a range of workforce development opportunities including a two year foundation degree course. The common assessment framework is in place and will be rolled out across all five localities from April 2009. In addition, local VCS organisations are involved in developing performance and quality assurance strategy for delivery of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) and associated performance groups.

Integrated front line delivery is supported through accountability for outputs and outcomes through performance measures which are put in place for services delivered through the VCS and these support priorities in the local CYPP. The VCS is including in the planning and delivery of services to children and young people through Extended Services, Children's Centres and Youth Centres.