

WORKING TOGETHER FOR CHILDREN'S WELFARE

*A Weekend Conference held at Cumberland Lodge, September 1986
Report by Edna Llewellyn, Health Journalist*

The following is a summary of the reports from the Working Groups. The reports were combined into a set of recommendations which were sent on behalf of the Conference to the DHSS in response to the draft circular. The groups discussed a wide range of issues and the points set out below are all matters on which there was widespread agreement, and which relate specifically to what is, or ought to be, in the DHSS circular. They can be considered under four main headings, although these inevitably overlap. These are: Procedures, Inter-disciplinary Working, Training and Resources.

1. Family Participation in Working Together

The DHSS Circular conveys the wrong approach to the participation of members of the family of a child who is subject to abuse procedures. The conference did not accept paragraph 2.25 of the draft circular. It considered that a suitable principle was that in respect of initial (investigative) case conferences, there should be a presumption that parents (or other family members) should not attend, though this could be reversed for special reasons or purposes. At subsequent case conferences (perhaps properly referred to as review conferences) there should be a presumption that family members would attend, though this presumption could also be reversed for specific reasons.

2. Guidance on Roles

The Conference considered that it would be helpful for guidelines to be published on the proper roles of the various disciplines involved in working together in child abuse. This was not intended as a restriction of the functions of each professional worker, but as a guide to know what they might expect of each other.

The conference recommended that all Area Review Committees should publish such guidelines suitable for their local conditions, including worked examples of how functions would operate in specific circumstances. Although some guidance might be given nationally, the role of the DHSS should probably not extend beyond requiring (as far as possible) the production of such guidelines.

3. Document Clearing House

A clearing house for documents relating to child abuse should be set up, so that information concerning child abuse such as Area Review Committee guidelines (as above) and core curricula (see below) could be easily available. The NSPCC and the National Children's Bureau could be considered as clearing houses.

4. Local Networks

Encouragement should be given to the development of formal and informal contacts and the creation of local teams and networks. Improved personal contacts were felt to be of great assistance to the proper and constructive exchange of information about children at risk of abuse and their families.

5. Support for Front Line Workers

It must be recognised that front line workers of all disciplines, but especially social workers and health visitors, need support and supervision. Specifically it should be recognised that workers visiting families in circumstances which may be personally dangerous to the worker or to a child, have a right to expect that they can make such visits in the company of another experienced worker, to afford some protection to the child and to themselves.

6. Supervision and Accountability

The importance of supervision for all workers cannot be overstated. They should have a right to support and consultation in return for accepting the duty to report and be accountable to more senior colleagues, who have to accept overall responsibility for the conduct of their service.

7. Collaboration of Government Departments

The Social Services Inspectorate, Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education and the Health Advisory Service should undertake joint inspections of local practices in child abuse. (Comparison was made with similar inspections of services for the elderly.)

8. Curricula

Detailed curricula for courses leading to professional qualification should be published to ensure adequate standards of training.

9. Common Core Training

The conference placed great emphasis on the need to examine the possibilities of introducing common core training both during and after qualifying courses. The disciplines of health, social work, education and the law should all have some common training before prejudices and stereotypes become ingrained. In-service courses should provide multi-disciplinary training and be an opportunity for individuals to develop the kind of contacts described in paragraph 4 above.

10. Public Education

Family life education should be an important part of a school syllabus. The conference noted with concern suggestions that children could be withdrawn from certain parts of a course, especially when this might lead to withdrawal of some children who were most vulnerable to abuse.

II. Resources

The conference recognised that these proposals had implications for resources. There was general agreement that there were also resource implications in the proposals contained in the draft circular. It was considered unhelpful to deny such effects, as the circular does in paragraph 18. The resources had to be made available.

Cumberland Lodge is the home of the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth Foundation of St Catharine's, a Christian Educational Trust established in 1947 by Amy Buller, a graduate of London University, and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother who is The Patron. "Working Together for Children's Welfare" was initiated by Elizabeth Sieff. Mrs Sieff was concerned by the recent case in which Jasmine Beckford was killed by her step-father whilst in the care of Brent Borough Council. This emphasized the need for greater communication and co-operation between the professionals concerned in child care. The participants were drawn from a wide range of professionals concerned with caring for, protecting, and educating children. They included social workers, health visitors, doctors, police, teachers and lawyers, many of them in a position to influence and formulate policies connected with child abuse.

The conference was addressed by:

Dr Alan Gilmour, Director of the NSPCC

Mr Louis Blom-Cooper QC

Sir Zelman Cowen, Chairman of the Press Council

Mr Alan Beattie, Head of the Health and Welfare Studies Department, London University

Inspector Trevor Buckroyd, Police Inspector, West Yorkshire Constabulary

Miss Susan Mowat, Unit General Manager, Community Health Care Services, London Borough of Hillingdon

Miss Gillian Ruch, Social Worker, London Borough of Wandsworth

Dr Arnon Bentovim, Consultant Child Psychiatrist, Great Ormond Street Hospital and The Tavistock Clinic, London

Miss Marianne Tranter, Psychiatric Social Worker, Great Ormond Street Hospital

The Rt Hon Norman Fowler, PC, MP, Secretary of State for Social Services

The Baroness Cox was in the Chair.