

# Parent Abuse

Report of the children and young people who abuse their parents and carers working group



A Working Group established by  
the External Services Scrutiny Committee

Members of the working group

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# Report of the Children & Young People Who Abuse Their Parents & Carers Working Group

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# Chairman's Foreword

Our Working Group was initiated when it became apparent from various sources that the abuse of parents and carers was an increasing problem. The Chairman of the External Services Scrutiny Committee, Councillor Mary O'Connor, asked me to chair a working group to investigate the issue and to report back to the Committee.



This was the first time I had chaired such a review and I was glad of the opportunity to investigate such an important issue. Much good work has already been done in relation to domestic violence against women (and men) by their partners, but little was known of the extent of the problem of abuse by children and young people to their parents and carers.

It would seem to be a 'hidden' problem as few parents are willing to testify against their own children, seeing the violent behaviour as a criticism of their own parenting skills so keep the problem secret. Very little information was available on the subject so we were very reliant on the witnesses that attended our meetings.

We are, therefore, very grateful to the many witnesses who came to our meetings to provide us with the information needed to make our recommendations and we particularly thank: Jill Patel and Kiran Seth of Hillingdon MIND, Barbara North of Hillingdon PCT, Melanie Parrish, Crown Prosecution Service; Anthony Scrafton of Central and North West London PCT – Mental Health; Marjorie Reid, Residential Homes for Young People; Jacquie Crowther, Youth Offending Service; Debbie Haith, Education and Children's Services – Safeguarding; Sue Lewis of Relate; Lorraine Penson from Sure Start; Linda Dines, Parent Partnership; Nick Ellender, Safeguarding Adults Service; and Erica Role, the Council's Domestic Violence Strategic Coordinator.

A very special 'thank you' goes to the mother who gave up her time to meet with me and the Democratic Services Manager to tell us about the abuse she experienced at the hands of her son. Thanks also go to the Youth Offending Team's Parenting Officer for arranging that meeting. All these people have clarified the importance of this review and shown the need for the recommendations we have made.

*Plr Judy Kelly*

# Introduction

1. This report presents the findings of the Children & Young People Who Abuse Their Parents & Carers Working Group which was established by the External Services Scrutiny Committee to review how instances of parent<sup>1</sup> abuse can be monitored and addressed. It should be made clear that the parent abuse considered by this Working Group is in relation to children and young people aged under 25.
2. As parent abuse cannot be solved by a single service, department or organisation, it is important that efforts to address the issue involve a range of coordinated initiatives that 'cut-across' or span different organisations.
3. Given this complexity, the Working Group comprised Members who also sat on the Domestic Violence Action Forum, Domestic Violence Steering Executive, Education & Children's Services POC, Residents' & Environmental Services POC, Social Services, Health & Housing POC and the Chairman of the parent Committee - the External Services Scrutiny Committee.

## Reason for the Review

4. The extent of parent abuse is unknown. The proposal to review parent abuse had arisen around the time of White Ribbon Day in November 2008. Much work had already been done around domestic violence and elder abuse had been widely publicised but little (if anything) appeared to have been done around parent abuse. As such, the External Services Scrutiny Committee committed to look into the issue and set up the Working Group.

## Aim of the Review

5. The review sought to answer a series of questions including:
  - Are Residents' expectations and concerns about abuse perpetrated by children and young people<sup>2</sup> on their parents and carers reflected in the Council's service standards?
  - How are instances currently identified and dealt with across the Council and how can this be improved and standardised?
  - How have other councils successfully dealt with the issue of children and young people who abuse their parents and carers?
  - What training of staff is in place to properly detect and assess cases?

## Terms of Reference

6. The Working Group's Terms of Reference were agreed as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Any reference to parents and parent abuse includes carers as well as parents

<sup>2</sup> Any reference to children or young people assumes the inclusion of both

- To consider existing Council services and procedures which address parental/carer abuse by children and young people and any improvements that could be made;
- To review whether the Council's processes in tackling this abuse are timely, effective and cost efficient;
- To review the guidance and support that is currently available from the Council to these parents and carers;
- To assess ways of measuring the number of cases of children and young people abusing their parents and carers and the accuracy of these methods;
- To seek out the views on this subject from Residents and partner organisations using a variety of existing and contemporary consultation mechanisms;
- To examine best practice elsewhere through case studies, policy ideas, witness sessions and visits; and
- After due consideration of the above, to bring forward strategic, innovative and practical recommendations to the Cabinet in relation to the Council's procedure in dealing with cases of children and young people in Hillingdon who abuse their parents and carers.

## Methodology

7. The main method for collecting evidence for this review was through a series of witness sessions held in October and December 2009 and January 2010. In addition to these sessions, the Chairman of the Working Group met with an abused parent to look at what help had been received and what further help would be useful to parents suffering from abuse.
8. This report presents the findings from these meetings. It sets out the background to how the review was undertaken and presents the Working Group's findings from the witness sessions. The recommendations contained within this report address the main issues that arose in the discussions.
9. The Working Group is incredibly grateful to the following people who gave up their time to attend the meetings and advise Members on the key issues:
  - Anthony Scrafton: Central & North West London PCT – Mental Health
  - Barbara North: Lead for Safeguarding Adults, Hillingdon PCT
  - Debbie Haith: Head of Safeguarding, Education & Children's Services, LBH
  - Erica Rolle: Domestic Violence Strategic Coordinator, Community Safety Team, LBH
  - Jacquie Crowther: Parenting Officer, Youth Offending Service, LBH
  - Jill Patel: Director, Hillingdon MIND
  - Kiran Seth: Asian Projects Coordinator, Hillingdon MIND
  - Linda Dines: Parent Partnership Officer, Parent Partnership, LBH
  - Lorraine Penson: Programme Manager, Sure Start
  - Marjorie Reid: Registered Manager, Residential Homes for Young People, LBH

- Melanie Parrish: Borough Crown Prosecutor, Crown Prosecution Service
- Nick Ellender: Service Manager – Safeguarding Adults Service, LBH
- Sue Lewis: Supervisor, Counsellor and Family Therapist, Relate

10. One of the main aims of this Working Group is to review, improve and formalise the Council's arrangements for addressing parent/carer abuse by children and young people in the Borough. The Working Group also wants to raise awareness of this 'hidden' problem and the importance of tackling it. It is appreciated that parent abuse is a controversial issue and the Working Group resolved that doing nothing was not an option. Whilst this review will not act as a magic wand to make the problem disappear, it is hoped that this work will act as a catalyst to the work that must be undertaken to tackle parent abuse in Hillingdon. This may be a long process and the impact may not be immediately clear, but the Working Group believes that parent abuse is an issue that can no longer be ignored.

**Recommendation 1**

**That Cabinet endorse the Working Group's view that there is evidence available to suggest that, in some families, one or other parent is a victim of abuse by their child. This is an issue of great concern and failure to tackle it now will have a significant impact on many families in our Borough.**

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# Evidence & Findings

## BACKGROUND

### What is parent abuse?

11. Parent abuse is quite difficult to define and could be confused with moody or difficult behaviour. When is the behaviour abuse? When is it not deliberate? When is the behaviour as a result of poor parenting? There are so many subjective issues that it makes it tricky to define.
12. Abuse could be defined as a pattern of behaviour in which physical violence and/or emotional coercion is used to gain or maintain power or control in a relationship. A single incident of assault also constitutes abuse. However, it is often difficult to recognise the pattern of abuse in a relationship, as people tend to perceive abusive behaviours as isolated incidents that are unrelated to one another. Yet abuse can often happen in cycles.
13. Abusive behaviour is often interspersed with calm, loving periods within the relationship and becomes cyclical (tensions build, followed by a form of physical or verbal abuse and then a period of calm when the abuser feels remorse, then tension builds, etc). Typically, the cycle repeats itself and often intensifies in frequency, as more small incidents occur, which result in tensions arising and the cycle of abuse to occur. People want to believe that each incident of abuse will not occur again. However, it usually does continue.
14. Sometimes abuse occurs without any warning signs or build-up or there may be no periods of remorse. In other situations, tension is always present. Either way, it is generally thought damaging for a young person to find themselves as the perpetrator of abuse towards their parents and carers.

### Is parent abuse a problem?

15. Information relating to the number of cases of children and young people abusing their parents and carers is difficult to ascertain and instances are frequently discovered as an aside to a family's contact with Council officers on another (unrelated) matter. It should be noted that approximately 10% of those parents and carers referred to the Youth Offending Service's Parenting Worker report experiencing abuse from their children and young people.
16. The only data currently available regarding the number of instances of parent abuse reported to the Council has been collated by the Youth Offending Service and has been summarised in the table below:

Year	Referrals to Parenting Officer	Cases Reporting Parent Abuse	% of Referrals Reporting Parent Abuse
2005	63	7	12%
2006	83	6	7%
2007	95	8	8%
2008	94	9	10%
2009*	73	4	5%

\* to October 2009

17. One of the difficulties experienced by officers is when they are faced with a child or young person who has been violent towards their parent or carer as the officers have a responsibility to safeguard the child and not the parent. Parents are often powerless to parent the child effectively because of their own fears about challenging or questioning them, thus leaving the child extremely vulnerable. As such, parents need to have the skills and confidence to effectively parent their children and ultimately keep them safe.

### Current Work

18. The issue of parent abuse was raised as an area for further work at the White Ribbon Day in November 2008. Having spoken to the witnesses, Members are keen to highlight that the perpetrators, who are children and young people, are vulnerable in their own right and are being criminalised as a result of their behaviour. Officers too are clear that children and young people should not be permanently branded as 'perpetrators'. There is some conflict for social care officers as their primary concern is the welfare of the child, even if they have been abusive towards their parents.
19. Work is currently being undertaken by various departments within the Council to address the issue of parent abuse. However, this work is somewhat disjointed and would benefit from some synchronicity. Although officers want to be able to offer help and support to those parents and carers being abused, resources are limited, little (if any) training has been undertaken by officers and there are currently no procedures in place to be able to offer assistance.
20. Current procedures need to be reviewed to ensure that victims have somewhere to turn. To ensure that Borough Residents receive the best possible service, procedures need to be put in place for victims of parent abuse to report instances. This would go some way to making sure that those Residents who want help are not overlooked.
21. Domestic violence of any sort is a sensitive subject and victims are often unwilling to speak openly about their situation for a variety of reasons including fear and embarrassment. Raising awareness of parent abuse (and the help and advice that is available to victims) may help them to speak up and gain support in dealing with the matter.



## Parent Abuse Awareness Workshop

22. The Special Education Needs (SEN) & Disability Act 2001 established a statutory duty for local authorities to make arrangements for parent partnership services from January 2002 and the SEN Code of Practice 2001 provides national minimum standards for those services. Hillingdon Parent Partnership (PP) is funded by the local authority to be an arms length service and offers parents and carers a free and confidential service. The service aims to ensure that parents and carers are able to play an informed part in any decisions about the educational provision made to meet their child's special educational needs and to build partnerships between parents/carers, the local authority and schools.
23. A large part of Parent Partnership's function is to build and improve partnerships between parents/carers, schools, the local authority, voluntary organisations and parents/carers' groups. PP also provides training and information workshops to raise awareness of the issues faced by parents/carers of children with SEN and contributes to the training of local authority and school staff.
24. When instances of parent abuse occur, there have often been serious issues and an inability to parent effectively which have precipitated the behaviour towards the parent or carer. When appropriate, parenting programmes are offered by the PP to those parents and carers that have disclosed that their children/young people abuse them. This has led the PP to joint parenting work with the Youth Offending Service for parents of young offenders.
25. The Parent Partnership and Youth Offending Team worked together to stage an awareness day prior to White Ribbon Day in 2008. This day was targeted at professionals (rather than parents) and confirmed that tackling the issue of parent abuse would be a huge undertaking and would need to be managed sensitively.
26. The Parent Abuse Awareness Workshop was held on 20 October 2008 specifically for professionals working with families. The meeting was well attended and issues raised by attendees included:
  - Undertaking a parent service mapping exercise to establish current provision
  - Setting up 2-hour bitesize workshops to look at issues such as awareness, and receive presentations from parents, etc
  - Setting up a helpline
  - Awareness raising through the use of leaflets, Hayes FM, The Leader, Hillingdon People, Flyers, the Council's Website and Horizon
  - Setting up a central register for parents that report abuse
  - Providing a support group to provide ongoing support and to continue the publicity campaign
  - Identifying the criteria for making a referral

## Steering Group

27. Following this workshop, a Steering Group was set up by the Council to address the lack of awareness of parent abuse within the Borough. The Terms of Reference for the Group have not yet been agreed but it is expected that this Group will look at identifying gaps in service provision and facilitating any changes necessary to meet the needs of

those parents and carers being abused by their children and young people. The Group will be working on the production of an action plan which will link the Parent Support Operational Group to the Parenting Strategic Plan.

28. The Steering Group meetings are to be held on a quarterly basis with ad hoc meetings scheduled when required to deal with urgent matters. It will comprise representatives from key Council departments that work with parents and families as well as a representative from the Metropolitan Police Service. The keys functions of the Steering Group are likely to be:
  - To agree an action plan for raising the profile of parent abuse
  - To identify organisations which can support parents being abused by their children
  - To raise the profile of parent abuse within the Borough amongst agencies and parents
  - To ensure parents have a resource for accessing support and guidance when experiencing abuse
  - To provide practitioners with the opportunity to express concerns and share successes in this field
29. It is important that the Domestic Violence Strategic Coordinator be included as a member of this Steering Group.
30. As well as looking at ways in which awareness of parent abuse can be improved, the Group is looking at recording reports of abuse and the reporting procedures available to parents/carers.
31. Information relating to parent abuse has been included in the Council's *Parenting Handbook: A Guide For Parents and Carers of 12-18 year olds in Hillingdon* produced by Parent Support Services. This brochure was distributed as part of White Ribbon Day on 24 November 2009. The parent abuse article gives information on warning signs, action that can be taken and prevention and gives contact details for the National Domestic Violence Helpline, Adfam and Re-solv.
32. There are concerns that there is currently no single point of contact within the Council for victims to call.

### **Guidance and Support Available from the Council**

33. Parent abuse can be the result of many different factors, e.g., culture, stressful situations, domestic violence and poor parenting. Those parents/carers who suffer domestic violence and have mental health issues make up a large proportion of the cases of parent abuse. These parents/carers often blame themselves for their child's behaviour. The Council's Domestic Violence team have assisted these victims by getting them in touch with support agencies. The Domestic Violence Strategic Coordinator also regularly holds sessions with these victims (in single sex groups) to reassure them that they are not to blame.
34. There have been stories of some parents/carers who would rather leave their child in bed when they refuse to get up on a school day and risk imprisonment as a result of the

non-attendance at school than be subjected to the abuse the child will give them if they insist that they get up.

35. Where appropriate, officers in the Youth Offending team have started to ask parents/carers if they are suffering parent abuse, but this information is not currently being formally recorded. Insofar as the support available to parents/carers is concerned, an unofficial listening service is currently provided by the Youth Offending team but only from a parenting perspective.
36. Officers have suggested that the profile of parent abuse needs to be raised and clear information and guidance needs to be worked up in relation to where victims can get help, advice and support.
37. It appears that there is currently no formal mechanism within the Council for addressing parent abuse and no information is available to parents suffering abuse. Officers only become aware of instances of parent abuse as an aside when talking to the parent or carer about another issue. Often parents and carers see their child's behaviour as just "the way the child is".

### **Recommendation 2**

**That Cabinet agree that the Domestic Violence Strategic Coordinator work with the Education and Children's Services Directorate, the Youth Offending Team and partner agencies to identify and enhance the support currently available to those families where one or other parent is a victim of abuse by their child.**

### **Recommendation 3**

**That Cabinet note that families where one or other parent is a victim of abuse by their child are currently viewed and have the same stigma as victims of Domestic Violence did fifteen or so years ago. The Working Group asks that we address this matter in a more timely way with a robust action plan.**

## **Measurement and Reporting Procedures**

38. 77% of the referrals received by the Safeguarding Adults team in the last year were from Residents aged 65+. Of the 66 referrals received by the Safeguarding Adults team in September 2009, not one instance of parent abuse had been reported. However, there had been one instance reported in October which was thought to be "more of a child protection issue". Performance reports now enable officers to record details of alleged perpetrators on the adults' service information system which will enable officers to monitor the number of reported parent abuse cases.
39. It should be noted that officers throughout the Council are not currently routinely asking those residents that they have contact with, whether or not they have been abused by their children. As such officers in the Parent Partnership, Youth Offending Service and Safeguarding Adults have put together a risk assessment form based on the one used by the Domestic Violence team. It is suggested that all relevant Council officers use this

generic form to ensure that they ask parents and carers the right question, e.g., are you suffering abuse at the hand of your child?

40. It is further suggested that information regarding parent abuse be circulated to children's centres in the Borough.

### **Resources available**

41. The Working Group believes that it is important to remember that the Council's resources are limited and that any action taken to address the issue should not raise parents' expectations too high.
42. There are currently no additional resources available within the Council to devote to identifying and tackling parent abuse. As such, any work undertaken as a result of this review will have to be fulfilled within the current budgetary constraints and subsumed within the workloads of existing officers.
43. In the future, consideration will need to be given to how additional resources can be identified to deal with the anticipated increase in reports of abuse that would result from the recommendations of this review.

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## **CURRENT WORK OF OTHER AGENCIES**

### **Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council**

44. The availability of information on the Internet regarding parent abuse is scarce and it seems that little work has been done by other local authorities in the UK. However, a Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council social worker's concerns over truanting children uncovered that children were violently abusing their parents. In 1999, this prompted the Wirral's Education Social Welfare Team to set up a 12 week course – Parents Enjoying A Changed Environment (PEACE) – which empowered parents who were the victims of violence.
45. The course proved successful in getting truanting children back to school with attendance increasing by about 20%. The first group of parents that completed the course also started up their own support network – Together United Living In Peace (TULIP) – which provides help for victims across the country. The group receive referrals from across the country and have helped hundreds of families.

### **Hillingdon MIND**

46. Officers at Hillingdon MIND have regular contact with adults aged 18-64 with mental health problems, the majority of whom are women. A number of women have reported instances of parent abuse which are linked to drugs and cultural issues. Clients are put in touch with support groups such as HDAS (Hillingdon Drug and Alcohol Services) and Rethink when appropriate.

47. MIND provide a befriending service for its clients as well as services such as counselling, sport, weekend activities, music and art. A weekly women's group has also been set up and takes place every Monday afternoon. It is regularly attended by 15-20 women who often discuss being the subject of parent abuse. MIND do not currently record information on the number of people that staff come into contact with that have experienced abuse from their children and young people. If a parent does not want to do anything about the abuse they are suffering, little can be done.
48. It is important to note that abuse suffered by parents impacts on any other children they might have. MIND has dealt with an instance where an adult child had been too worried to move out of the family home and leave the abused parent alone with the child that was abusing her. MIND officers find that abused parents and carers often do not want to report the abuse that their children inflict as they do not want to get them into trouble.

### **Residential Homes for Young People**

49. The Council's residential homes for young people house asylum seeking young people as well as young people from the locality. Staff have been made aware of instances of parent abuse and there was an instance where a child had been put into care as a result of their abuse towards their parents. In situations such as this, the child is offered counselling. There have also been times when the abused parent does not want to speak to a counsellor about the abuse as they do not want to publicise the matter. Parents are also often ashamed and embarrassed that their children are in care.
50. MIND officers have also worked with trafficked young people that have been put into the care system. Some of these young people are abusive towards their carers.
51. The Working Group was keen that all elders in our community groups be contacted to find out if they could help to raise awareness of parent abuse in their communities.

### **Hillingdon PCT**

52. A new Safeguarding Adults Team was put together in June 2009 and no instances of parent abuse have been recorded during this time.

### **Crown Prosecution Service**

53. The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) has a team of ten lawyers and 20 support staff. This team receives evidence on cases from the police and looks at the public interest factors of each in determining which go cases to trial. The team already has strong links with the Council's Domestic Violence Team and particularly the Strategic Coordinator.
54. The majority of the work undertaken by the CPS in relation to parent abuse arises from the desperation of the parents. The team have found that children and young people who abuse their parents and carers fall into three groups:
- Young people/children with diagnosed or undiagnosed mental illness;
  - Young people/children abusing drugs or, to a lesser extent, alcohol; or
  - Young people/children with parents who lack adequate parenting skills.

55. The CPS has received a number of cases where an abusive child had grown up in a violent household and thought that it was the norm. It was often thought that a parent testifying against the child that has abused them is the worst betrayal a parent could inflict. As a result, very few parents actually go through with the prosecution and, more often than not, the parent withdraws their statement. There was only one case that had actually gone to court – despite the parent withdrawing their statement, the prosecution went ahead on the strength of the statements submitted by the child’s siblings.
56. The CPS does not generally compel parents to give evidence. However, if there is evidence of escalating violence or the abuse is affecting other children or young people in the household, the CPS can compel the parents to give evidence.
57. The CPS also has the option of a “conditional caution disposal” which means that the perpetrator admits guilt but does not receive a criminal record. This option enables the CPS to add conditions such as a letter of apology or attendance at a rehabilitation clinic.

### **Central & North West London PCT – Mental Health**

58. Teachers and family therapists at the Marlborough Family Day Unit and Education Centre work with parents that are hard to reach and children that are hard to teach. The service works with approximately 10 families each day and, in particular, with children that are on the cusp of exclusion from school. The multi-disciplinary team help families to help other families.
59. Work has been undertaken to look at the histories of problematic experiences in families and how to interrupt a pattern of unprovoked violence. Approximately 85% of the families that the teachers and therapists come into contact with have experienced parent abuse.
60. Over the last two years, staff at the Marlborough Family Day Unit and Education Centre have worked with parents and children to look at how they can recognise their triggers. In group sessions, parents are able to help other parents to pick up on their stressors and “crumple buttons”. Bio-feedback devices have also been used to identify triggers by using heart rate monitors to record how excited parents and children become.
61. An article on the work undertaken at the Marlborough Family Day Unit and Education Centre was published in the Journal of Family Therapy in January 2010<sup>3</sup>.

### **Youth Offending Service**

62. The Youth Offending Team works with children and young people who have been prosecuted for offences, some of whom have also abused their parents. This abuse is recorded informally.
63. A representative from the team sits on the Council’s Steering Group which is looking at parent abuse and how the Council deals with reports of this type of abuse. The Steering Group has drawn up a wish list of things that the officers would like to see in

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Hearts on their sleeves’: the use of systemic biofeedback in school settings: Brenda McHugh, Neil Dawson, Anthony Scrafton and Eia Asen; **Journal of Family Therapy** (2010) 32: 58-72

place to deal with parent abuse which includes a 24 hour helpline for parents and carers. In the meantime, officers are keen that parents' expectations are not raised unduly as there is currently nowhere to refer parents to so that they can get help.

64. When a child's bad behaviour is not recognised, it can escalate whilst, at the same time, the parent's ability to parent diminishes. Generally, officers are keen to ensure that children that are abusive to their parents are not criminalised and that help is provided through other routes.
65. The only support currently offered by the Youth Offending Service is an unofficial listening service for parents and carers that wanted to talk to someone about the abuse they received from their children and young people. It appears that this service is not provided by any other Council teams. However, the Council does offer courses for parents to raise their self esteem and teach them positive parenting skills. These courses bolster parents' and carers' faith in their ability to parent their children and young people and helps them to take control of the situation.

### **Safeguarding – Education & Children's Services**

66. Officers delivering the Council's core statutory services for safeguarding children receive referrals from other agencies that have expressed concern for the welfare of a child or young person up to the age of 18. A history of violence in the family is often identified in the assessment of children and young people that have been physically violent or verbally aggressive to their parents. For these children it is a learned behaviour.
67. The age that children start being abusive towards their parents is getting younger. Children have different learning abilities and complex needs and can become increasingly frustrated and, as a result, violent.
68. Members of the Working Group are concerned about the limited number of health visitors involved in the work undertaken by the Safeguarding Team. There is also concern as to whether the preventative agenda is aggressive enough.
69. Parenting is considered a priority of the prevention agenda as the parents that officers come into contact with often need to improve their parenting skills. There are a number of courses run by the Council to help parents manage their children in a positive way. These courses are tailored to different age groups. In addition, relevant Council officers have been trained to deliver intervention when required.
70. A significant amount of work has been undertaken by the Council to reduce the number of teenage pregnancies in the Borough as well as to reduce the number of second pregnancies in this group. As part of this teen parenting support role, consideration has been given to educating teens about the reality of parenting within the PSHE curriculum.
71. The focus of the safeguarding children work is on the family and not individuals as it is recognised that parent abuse impacts on the whole family. To enable this work to be undertaken, the Adult Safeguarding Board and the Children's Safeguarding Board are working more closely together. An intensive family support programme has been established and pilot projects have been introduced to work with families as a whole.

## **Relate**

72. Relate offers family and relationship counselling as well as life skills training and courses for parents that are parting. When parents are dealing with issues such as bereavement, divorce or redundancy, the dynamics of the family unit are changed and the children are no longer the focus of attention. As such, children sometimes express their frustration through verbal and/or physical aggression.
73. Whilst procedures have been put in place to deal with domestic violence and data has been collected on the issue, there are currently no procedures in place at Relate to deal with parent abuse. The current Relate policy promotes safety before therapy as it is recognised that, where violence is concerned, therapy can lull victims into a false sense of security and make their situation worse. With regard to safety, each case is assessed on its own merits and consideration is given to the willingness of the child to attend sessions and accept responsibility for their violent/aggressive behaviour.
74. It has been found that drugs, alcohol and mental health impact significantly on the behaviour of children and young people. In these circumstances, Relate might not be able to help the child. If this is the case, other members of the family can be supported by Relate but the child might need to be referred on to another agency to deal with the core issues.
75. As parent abuse affects all family relationships, it is really important that the thoughts and feelings of any siblings are taken into account and that they are given a voice. It has been found that these siblings see patterns of behaviour and can make useful observations in order to help the family move forward. Counselling offers a place to look at family relations where the behaviour is the problem and not the child. An action plan is then put in place.
76. Parents often play down the behaviour of abusive children. However, by talking to other members of the family (including siblings), different perspectives emerge. Parents often feel guilty and worried that their children will be taken away from them if they admit that there is a problem. As such, it is important that Relate offer them a non-judgemental environment in which they feel comfortable.
77. When helping families that are experiencing parent abuse, staff at Relate ask the parents to consider how they would feel if they saw someone else's child behaving in the same way in the supermarket or doctor's surgery – would they see that as acceptable behaviour. By externalising the situation, the parents often find it easier to be more objective.
78. Successful peer mentoring groups have been set up by Relate at Abbotsfield and Harlington Community schools. A programme has also been set up in Ealing where Relate trains teachers to look out for signs of parent abuse in the children and young people.
79. Consideration is being given to setting up peer listening groups in schools that would be run by the children themselves. Work has also been undertaken in Children's Centres in other boroughs.



## **Sure Start**

80. The Sure Start programme is run at Barra Hall and Colham Manor school Children's Centres. The focus of the Children's Centres is the implementation of preventative measures in a non-threatening way and effort is made to respond to the needs of the community. The presence of the social care team at Barra Hall has proven very successful.
81. Barra Hall is open access and receives self-referrals as well as referrals from other agencies. As well as providing family support workers to visit families in their own homes and register them, the service provides holistic support to local Residents. To ensure that each family receive a consistent service, they are given a named contact for the duration of their use of the service. In addition, Sure Start has a new midwife service which includes the recent appointment of a domestic violence midwife.
82. It is clear that parent abuse is a learned behaviour. There is a danger that younger siblings might mimic the behaviour of their brother or sister abusing their parents in order to get their own way. In order to help families, Barra Hall provides a counselling service for couples and individuals. Training programmes have also been established to take positive steps in respect of child development, self esteem and setting boundaries.
83. Work has been undertaken with teenage parents and a peer support programme has been set up where young parents go into schools to talk about the reality of parenting.
84. At a recent seminar attended by Sure Start staff, a parent had talked about the abuse she had received from her child. It is clear that abused parents love their children but that they have feelings of inadequacy. These feelings are perpetuated by consistent emotional and verbal abuse which grinds them down and diminishes their self confidence. It is thought that many abused mothers have come from abusive families and it is important to break this cycle of abuse.
85. Although it is too early to judge the success of Children's Centres, Sure Start has improved its partnership working over the last eight years. When Barra Hall first opened, a lot of work was undertaken with the Safer Neighbourhood Team (SNT) to improve the safety of the park. Further use could be made of the SNT and contact would be made to encourage SNT presence and participation in the work at the Children's Centres. Effort will also be made to invite the SNT to events and open days held at Barra Hall which will encourage interaction with local Residents.

## **Community Safety**

86. The Council's Domestic Violence team looks at the response to domestic violence in the Borough. A quarterly mapping exercise is undertaken to ensure that the most appropriate risk assessments are in place and to monitor the outcomes. Following the witness sessions, data collected by Relate and Sure Start will be included in this mapping exercise.
87. The Domestic Violence team facilitates monthly domestic violence training sessions which are also useful for obtaining information about the services available to victims

from other agencies. These services are included in a directory which will soon be published on the Council's website. Consideration will also be given to adding sub sections in the directory and additional information about the services provided by each agency when updating the directory on a regular basis.

#### **Recommendation 4**

**That Cabinet support the inclusion of information relating to services available for families where one or other parent is a victim of abuse by their child in the Council's *Directory of National and Local Agencies and Help Lines for victims of Domestic Violence and Transition Services.***

## **PARENT / CHILD EXPERIENCE**

### **Situation 1 – Carol and James<sup>4</sup>**

88. On Monday 14 December 2009, the Working Group Chairman met with Carol, a parent that had had contact with the Youth Offending Team. Carol was being abused by her 19 year old son, James. James had been a happy child but had behaved strangely from an early age. From the age of about 2, he was escaping from Carol over very high fences and getting out of first floor windows at 2am.
89. Although the Behavioural Support Unit had been called to deal with James when he was in junior school, Carol was not sure what action had been taken following this. He did not see a child psychologist until he was 11 and at secondary school. Although he was subsequently prescribed Ritalin (which had worked), he was not offered any cognitive behavioural therapy and was not keen on taking drugs as he felt that he did not have a behavioural problem. James stopped taking the Ritalin.
90. James had been diagnosed with ADHD and dyslexia but this hadn't been diagnosed until he was about 14 years old. Carol believed that James was also perhaps suffering from autism or manic depression but this had not yet been diagnosed. James was very forgetful and would frequently bite/gnaw things such as the TV remote control – he had also bitten people including Carol.
91. Aged 14, James served 3 months of a 6 month sentence in youth offending – he had not been physically violent towards Carol until he came out. Around this same time, James was finally 'statemented' by his school. His behaviour subsequently worsened and Carol felt that suspension or exclusion from school had not helped matters and believed that children needed inclusion and that the special needs schools were "hoodie holding bays".
92. Although Carol had contacted the police to report the violence she was subjected to at the hands of her son, the time between the arrest and going to court could be as long as

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<sup>4</sup> These names are not the real names of the parents and children

3 months. Often there was nowhere else for the child to go, other than back to the family home with the parent that they abused. The parent could then be further intimidated by the child. Carol thought that it would be useful for the child to be housed elsewhere until the case went to court.

93. James had been caught for committing crimes (such as burglary) but, because he was very forgetful, by the time his court case came around, he had forgotten what he had done that had landed him in court in the first place. He was often verbally abusive to Carol and threatened to physically hurt her. As such, she routinely hid all the sharp knives in the house. He was also abusive to his girlfriend who he had been dating for about 5 years. James had gotten enrolled at college but had been disruptive and was subsequently asked to leave – he was now unemployed and frustrated.
94. Carol's parents had been subjected to intimidation by James – her father was scared of him; her mother had taken James to live with her for about 3 months and had been subjected to the same abuse that Carol received. James saw his dad fairly regularly.
95. Carol had had a panic door fitted on her bedroom which had been a life saver. James had smashed a number of doors in the house which had not been replaced partly because of the associated cost and partly because there was a likelihood that they would get broken again.
96. Carol felt that she was becoming increasingly isolated. Her friends, family and neighbours had gradually stopped coming to the house because of James' behaviour. Her neighbours had also stopped speaking to her and she had been made redundant so would be isolated further.
97. Carol felt that the support she and James received stopped when James turned 16, e.g., youth offending team, child benefit, education and particularly social services. Although James' DLA stopped when he turned 18, he did not seem to worry (or have any concept) about money. Often appointments were made for children who then didn't turn up because they did not feel that they had a problem or because they just forgot to go. Carol felt that it would be useful to have home visit appointments.
98. The Teenage Support Group organised by the Parent Partnership and the Kids Can Achieve support group had changed Carol's life but she did not find out about these groups until very late in the day. They had been very helpful.
99. Although there was the worry of having her child labelled, Carol felt that ASBOs could be used for good, e.g., the child/young person could be made to go on courses such as anger management, empathy or IT. The child/young person could also be made to clean up any graffiti that they had done – whilst she believed that this was sometimes used as a punishment, she felt that it was often not enforced.
100. Carol had looked into the possibility of getting James sectioned so that he could be assessed but the process was quite complicated. She felt that there ought to be a way of forcibly getting James assessed and queried whether there was a way of getting children punished and helped at the same time. She suggested that YoungMinds ([www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)) and CFA be contacted for information on parent abuse.

### **Situation 2 – Paul, Paula and Jenny**<sup>4</sup>

101. Jenny was a 16 year old white British female who lived with her mother, father, and 10 year-old sister. Jenny was referred to the Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust by her GP as she was experiencing difficulties in managing her anger and feeling low in mood. Both she and her family were keen for support. An initial assessment was carried out.
102. Arguments at home had become overheated. Jenny's behaviour escalated during these arguments to the point of becoming physically aggressive toward all family members at different times. However, her aggression was usually directed toward her father, Paul. Jenny often broke the rules that were set by her parents and felt that there were no longer any consequences that could effectively be put in place. A few months ago, things became worse and Jenny went to stay with her grandparents for two weeks. Relationships between Jenny and her parents had deteriorated. Jenny was remorseful but felt she could not control her anger.
103. Both Jenny and her parents reported finding it increasingly difficult to talk as a family about what was happening – particularly after there had been an argument. When thinking about the reasons for the difficulties, Jenny felt that she had difficulties in her relationships with both parents. Jenny's parents, Paul and Paula, were finding it difficult to know how to manage Jenny's behaviour.
104. Jenny, Paul and Paula all agreed that things had become much worse following an incident in school where Jenny had been bullied and was seriously assaulted. Around this same time, Jenny also experienced quite serious health concerns. Following this, she began to truant from school and there was a significant drop in her grades.
105. The family was referred for family sessions and met with a family therapist for three family sessions. The purpose of these sessions was to help enhance relationships in the family. Both Jenny and her parents were very motivated to change. Jenny worked hard in school and began to receive awards for merit. The family began doing more activities together. Despite further stressful events in the family, each was able to express their feelings and discuss things together in a more positive way.

### **Situation 3 – Peter, Maz and Malcolm**<sup>4</sup>

106. Peter was a 17 year old white British male who lived with his mother, Maz, and his father, Malcolm. He was referred to the Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust by his GP due to concerns about his anger. He was seen for an initial assessment and, when the work began, Peter disclosed that he had a mild physical disability. He was concerned that his anger was caused by this condition and that he may never be able to control it and that he might just be an angry person.
107. Peter shared that he had experienced severe bullying due to his disability in the past in school. He eventually began lashing out at others by fighting physically with anyone he

perceived to be insulting him, his family, or others. He was becoming violent with his Maz at home as well as other family members.

108. During Peter's early life, the family situation was not stable. Malcolm had left the family and only returned recently. Maz also had difficulty controlling her own anger, which resulted in escalating arguments with Peter. Over time, Peter worked hard to stop lashing out at people and instead threw or destroyed objects instead. This was causing damage and also hurting him at times. Peter presented as very thoughtful and able to reflect on the situation and his worries about his temper.
109. Peter participated in 11 individual sessions. For each of these sessions, Peter brought a family member to act as a witness and reflector to the work he was doing. This also allowed space to discuss and repair some of the damage that the violence had caused in these relationships.

#### **Situation 4 – Raj and Paramjit<sup>4</sup>**

110. Raj was a 14-year-old Asian male who lived with his mother, Paramjit. He was referred to the Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust due to concerns regarding difficulty in his relationship with Paramjit. Raj had also recently hit Paramjit on more than one occasion. Two years ago his parents divorced and, although Raj had some contact with his father, he had lived with Paramjit since the separation.
111. When Raj's parents were together, his father often undermined his mother in relation to parenting decisions. This often resulted in confusing messages for Raj, and few boundaries were in place. Paramjit had also been reluctant to enforce boundaries, or involved police during incidents for fear that Raj might lose his school placement, or that his future might be affected. The relationship between Raj and his mother had deteriorated significantly. They were both highly critical, resentful and angry toward one another and neither was able to stop arguments from escalating.

#### **Situation 5 – John and Linda<sup>4</sup>**

112. John was a 6 year old white British male who lived with his mother (Linda), father (Philip), and 4 year old brother. John was referred to Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust due to concerns regarding his behaviour and emotions. He had started to lash out and hit his mother, Linda.
113. Linda had a history of mental health difficulties, which were undiagnosed and untreated until recently. She was now on medication and had engaged in treatment, which had helped her to regulate her emotions and symptoms. However, for much of John's life, Linda had been unpredictable in her parenting and responses. Both Linda and Philip had good parenting skills. However, Linda could relapse and become unpredictable and volatile. As a result, John's relationship with his mother was confusing and distressing at times.

## FUTURE WORK

114. Although Members had believed that the magnitude of parent abuse needed to be established before any further work could be undertaken, it soon became clear that this would not be possible. As such, the focus should be placed on identifying parent abuse as a problem, raising awareness of it and putting investment in place to catch it at an early stage.
  115. Parents that are being abused will often not want to admit what is happening as they feel that admission could permanently damage their relationship with their child and would be the ultimate betrayal. These parents need to be provided with a reliable support facility to empower them to do what is right for them and ensure that they do not feel that they are alone.
  116. There is a distinction between those agencies that provide support and those agencies that deal with the implications of the abuse. Parent abuse is an issue of concern to all of the agencies that attended Working Group meetings as well a number of other organisations, such as the YMCA, that had not been able to attend the meetings.
  117. The profile of parent abuse needs to be raised to stop it being such a taboo subject. However, the infrastructure needs to be in place to help abused parents before the profile is raised. The Domestic Violence Action Forum is the ideal platform for all of the relevant agencies to discuss parent abuse, give the issue a bigger voice and develop simple data. Common Assessment Framework training, which was used by all agencies, would also need to be included in this process.
  118. In the short term, a generic risk assessment form (based on the one used by the Domestic Violence team) will be used across all relevant Council services and this will be made available to other agencies that come into contact with abused parents. This will ensure that all agencies are asking vulnerable parents if they are being abused and will give them the opportunity to get help. This will also enable them to identify families that are the subject of parent abuse and work together to put the most appropriate support in place for them. It is clear that the whole family should be supported as a unit and not just the abuser or the abusee.
  119. In the medium term, consideration will need to be given to securing resources for a 24 hour helpline.
  120. Furthermore, the Council's Youth Offending Service will circulate information regarding parent abuse to the Parenting Operational Group for its agreement to send out to all children's centres in the Borough.
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# Closing word

- 121. It is appreciated that the implementation of the recommendations contained within this report will not be something that can be completed overnight. The approach to implementing change is likely to be slow to ensure that we get it right first time and to manage the expectations of those affected by parent abuse.
- 122. The Working Group does not pretend that it has a blueprint for what this approach should look like.
- 123. The Working Group is passionate about the issue of parent abuse and, if nothing else, this review will raise the profile and acknowledge that there is a problem so that further work can be planned to tackle the issue.

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## Comments of the External Services Scrutiny Committee

- 124. The External Services Scrutiny Committee established this Working Group to examine the issue parent abuse in Hillingdon. We, the Committee, have considered the Working Group's findings outlined in this report and are delighted to present these to Cabinet and the Council's partners. The report clearly outlines the seriousness of the situation in Hillingdon and the importance of providing a coordinated response to the needs of abused parents and carers. We fully endorse the recommendations and hope that the report will kick-start a step-change to tackle parent abuse.

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# Appendix 1: glossary, references & further reading

## Glossary

<b>CPS</b>	Crown Prosecution Service
<b>DLA</b>	Disability Living Allowance
<b>PCT</b>	Primary Care Trust
<b>PEACE</b>	Parents Enjoying A Changed Environment
<b>POC</b>	Policy Overview Committee
<b>PP</b>	Parent Partnership
<b>SEN</b>	Special Education Needs
<b>TULIP</b>	Together United Living In Peace



## References & further reading

- 'Hearts on their sleeves': the use of systemic biofeedback in school settings: Brenda McHugh, Neil Dawson, Anthony Scrafton and Eia Asen; **Journal of Family Therapy** (2010) 32: 58-72
- Parents face their violent children: Clare Purdy; **BBC News Online, Manchester**; 15 March 2003  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/emgland/2824537.stm>
- Teenage Kicks; **Community Care**; 20 November 2003  
<http://www.communitycare.co.uk/Articles/2003/11/20/42887/Teenage-kicks.htm>
- Tips on dealing with aggression in children; **Parentline Plus**; 19 November 2009  
<http://parentlineplus.org.uk/default.aspx?page=viewtip&module=tips-view&id=22>
- 'Domestic Abuse Against Parents'; **Parenting Handbook - A Guide For Parents and Carers of 12-18 Year Olds In Hillingdon**, pages 18-19; Parent Support Services, London Borough of Hillingdon

# Appendix 2:

## Summary of recommendations

This appendix lists the recommendations made by the Working Group.

### Recommendation 1

That Cabinet endorse the Working Group's view that there is evidence available to suggest that, in some families, one or other parent is a victim of abuse by their child. This is an issue of great concern and failure to tackle it now will have a significant impact on many families in our Borough.

### Recommendation 2

That Cabinet agree that the Domestic Violence Strategic Coordinator work with the Education and Children's Services Directorate, the Youth Offending Team and partner agencies to identify and enhance the support currently available to those families where one or other parent is a victim of abuse by their child.

### Recommendation 3

That Cabinet note that families where one or other parent is a victim of abuse by their child are currently viewed and have the same stigma as victims of Domestic Violence did fifteen or so years ago. The Working Group asks that we address this matter in a more timely way with a robust action plan.

### Recommendation 4

That Cabinet support the inclusion of information relating to services available for families where one or other parent is a victim of abuse by their child in the Council's *Directory of National and Local Agencies and Help Lines* for victims of Domestic Violence and Transition Services.