



Children's Neglect Strategy

2025 - 2027

'In Wolverhampton we believe that every child should have the opportunity to reach their full potential and that children are best supported to grow and achieve within their own families where it is safe to do so'

WOLVERHAMPTON SAFEGUARDING TOGETHER PARTNERSHIP

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Why do we need this strategy?

Research into Adverse Childhood Experiences show that when a person experiences abuse or neglect as a child, and the longer they experience it, the worse their physical, mental and social outcomes are likely to be.

The National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel report identifies 393 Serious Incident Notifications (SINs) and rapid reviews submitted for serious incidents where abuse and/or neglect is known or suspected that occurred between April 2022 and March 2023.

Around two-fifths of these due to the death of a child and around three-fifths due to serious harm, which is similar to the 2021 figures. In over three-quarters of cases the family of the child was known to children's social care either as an open case or previously, and a third of children were either on, or had previously been on, a child protection plan. In addition, nearly a fifth of children were classed as 'looked after' either at the time of the incident or previously. We have identified how a range of factors were present in the lives of these children, for example mental health needs, especially among teenagers, ongoing neglect, and absence from school. Other key findings from SINs and rapid reviews include:

- The age distribution within rapid reviews shows a similar pattern to the 2021 report with a predominance of infants under the age of 1 (36%) with a second peak in the 11 to 15 age group (21%).
- In comparison to the 2021 census figures for 0 to 17-year-olds, children from mixed/multiple ethnic groups and Black/African/Caribbean/Black British ethnicities were overrepresented in the rapid reviews. Conversely, children from Asian/Asian British ethnicities or other ethnic groups were underrepresented in the rapid reviews.
- Over half of rapid reviews (53%) noted that the child had experienced neglect prior to the incident. This was the same proportion for those incidents where the child had died (53%) or had suffered serious harm (52%).

Government guidance describes neglect as:

The persistent failure to meet a child's basic physical and/or psychological needs, likely to result in the serious impairment of the child's health or development. Neglect may occur during pregnancy, as a result of maternal substance abuse. Once a child is born, neglect may involve a parent or carer failing to:

- Provide adequate food, clothing, and shelter (including exclusion from home or abandonment).
- Protect a child from physical and emotional harm or danger.
- Ensure adequate supervision (including the use of inadequate care givers).
- Ensure access to appropriate medical care or treatment.
- Provide suitable education.

It may also include neglect of, or unresponsiveness to, a child's basic emotional needs' ([Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023](#)).

Cumulative Neglect

The terms 'cumulative risk' and 'cumulative harm' were first identified by Bromfield and Higgins in Australia in 2005. They defined cumulative harm as 'the effects of patterns of circumstances and events in a child's life which diminish their sense of safety, stability and wellbeing. Cumulative harm is the existence of compounded experiences of multiple episodes of abuse or layers of neglect.'

Wolverhampton has adopted the following definition of Cumulative Harm:

Cumulative Harm refers to the layering of episodes of abuse, neglect, and other adverse experiences over a period, which collectively can have a significant impact on a child, young person or adults' wellbeing. It encompasses various forms of harm including emotional, physical, and psychological, often exacerbated by the behaviour of caregivers or other significant individuals in the person's life.

The recognition of cumulative neglect and its impact continue to be a key challenge for practitioners' nationally'. There is a danger when working with cases of neglect that professionals wait for a serious one-off incident to happen to provide evidence that the children are suffering significant harm on a given day. With neglect a large number of smaller issues, when collated, may show significant harm over time. However, recognising this fact does not always lead to sustained change for the children.

Please refer to the [Neglect](#) section of the West Midlands Regional Procedures for further support on the implementation and principles of this strategy.

By identifying circumstances which put parents and carers under stress and getting them the right help at the right time, we can protect their children from neglect. Parents or carers may be dealing with complex challenges that directly impact on their ability to meet their children's needs. These can include domestic abuse, substance misuse, mental ill-health problems and trauma. We also know that external factors such as financial difficulties, poverty, poor housing and homelessness, can make it more difficult for parents to meet their children's needs.

Our vision

‘In Wolverhampton we believe that every child should have the opportunity to reach their full potential and that children are best supported to grow and achieve within their own families where it is safe to do so’

This strategy is Wolverhampton’s agreed approach to helping children, their families, and our professional community to work together to ensure we each play our part in helping children to thrive and ensure their needs and rights are not neglected.

The fundamental basis of this strategy is to be able to identify when a child’s needs for love, care, attention, education, and human rights are neglected and to help the child and family and professionals working with them to do something about it.

Understanding neglect involves an awareness of the child’s rights and needs. In this way, we can act early to respond and help families where there is concern that some of the child’s needs and rights cannot be provided. The UN convention on the rights of the child underpins this strategy and should be promoted by all organisations working with children and their families.

This document explains what we want to achieve in terms of impact on the lives of children where there are concerns about neglect. Reference is made to literature which will help practitioners and families to understand the subject in more detail.

Neglect has been identified as a key priority for Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together Partnership. The focus of the priority group is to work in collaboration to respond to the priority questions as set by our Executive Group:

Lead question:

To what extent are agencies and families aware of what neglect and self-neglect looks like and the impact it can have?

Sub-questions:

- Is there a clear and shared understanding of the level of neglect and self-neglect within the city and the factors that can lead to it?
- What tools exist to support practitioners in consistently identifying neglect and self-neglect and its impact?
- How well do professionals / agencies who identify neglect and self-neglect understand what support services are in place and how to access them?
- What is the lived experience of children and adults in relation to neglect and self-neglect, and how has it improved our prevention and support?

Learning from Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews

Knowing and considering the parents history and vulnerabilities when working with the family and understanding a child's lived experience and what they may be communicating by their behaviour.

- Professionals will be curious about parents / carers childhood experiences and how these impact on capacity.
- Professionals will be curious around the behaviours children are communicating.

The cumulative impact of long-term neglect on children.

- Partners will be skilled to identify neglect at an earlier stage so that parents can be supported through universal and early support services to improve the lived experience of their children.
- Professionals to be conscious in how they can assist in evidencing the serious and severe impact of cumulative neglect.

The likelihood of child neglect coexisting with other forms of abuse.

- Professionals will be aware of the increased likeliness of other forms of abuse (physical / sexual / emotional abuse) coexisting with severe neglect and consider this within their assessment.

The impact of 'growing families and growing children' on the ability of parents to manage.

- Consider how the partnership can work together to assess capacity to parent safely in larger sibling groups.
- Consider the additional demands on parents when caring for a fully dependant baby versus other young children and robustly meeting their needs.

Bespoke safe handling and coping with crying advice, to include older siblings.

- Professionals to provide consistent and accessible advice and support to families to prevent shaking and abusive head trauma.
- This is available from the [ICON website](#).

Increase understanding on how to apply thresholds in line with the [Wolverhampton Thresholds of Need and Support](#) document when working with neglect.

- Improve professionals' knowledge of the thresholds for neglect.
- Increase in effective assessments of need and timely referrals to early help support services.

Document: [Wolverhampton Thresholds of Need and Support](#)

Increase the partnerships confidence around application of the [WST Escalation Policy](#) to raise concerns.

- Ensure that professionals are aware of and know how to use and apply the escalation policy and procedures within.
- Increase in supported professional challenge and case discussions.
- Improved partnership working.
- Improved outcomes for children.

Document: [WST Escalation Policy](#)

Understanding the long-term impact of neglect and the increased risk and vulnerabilities of adolescents.

- Early indication and recognition of needs and risks for adolescents.
- Professionals equipped to work with adolescents in ways that improve and achieve outcomes.
- Helping young people access the right support at the right time to reduce the risk of child exploitation, including continuity of support at transition to adulthood.

Unpicking biases and pre-held assumptions (or explore multiple hypothesis)

- Practitioners should unpick biases and assumptions on how assess and perceive risk to a child which includes those relating to culture, ethnicity, gender and sexuality.
- Practitioners should re-evaluate hypothesis – don't stick to the one hypothesis – allow theories etc to change as information demands that it does.

Understanding the child's voice

- Practitioners should understand, explore and respond to the daily lived experience of the child.
- Avoid heavy reliance on what adults are saying to ensure the – child's voice is heard.
- Understand the Importance of observations of the child – no matter the age and recording these.

- Consider child developmental milestones and the stimulation available to them.
- Consider wider perspectives, such as what the child has said to family, friends and/or other professionals.

Understanding the relationship between poverty and neglect

- Practitioners' should understand it is widely accepted that poverty is a 'contributory causal factor' for abuse and neglect (Bywaters etc.al, 2016).
- Consider how desensitisation to poverty may result in neglect be 'downgraded' and be seen as 'normal' in the context of the local area.
- Consider how poverty can be mis-interpreted for neglect, and vice versa.
- Distinguish between poverty and neglect to determine whether a Family Help or Safeguarding response is required.

Overarching Strategic Priorities – Improving Outcomes for Children

All agencies have a responsibility to recognise and assess neglect using the Wolverhampton Children's Neglect Screening Tool and Assessment (WeCAN) in everyday practice with families where neglect is a potential concern.

Ensure that the voice of the child and young person and their lived experience is captured and considered as part of all assessments and should shape any support / intervention.

Think Family – Ensure that the views, experiences and needs of the family are also considered.

Video: [Think Family](#)

Ensure that the [Wolverhampton Thresholds of Need and Support](#) document and the [WeCAN Screening Tool](#) and [WeCAN Assessment](#) are used by all services to gain a common understanding and level of risk of neglect.

Improve awareness and recognition of all aspects of cumulative neglect coexisting with other forms of abuse.

Agencies to ensure that all cases are managed effectively with appropriate leadership to achieve desired outcomes, and that escalation takes place in a timely and professional manner to prevent delay.

Operational Requirements

Workforce development:

- Training for practitioners is essential to equip them to recognise, assess and intervene in cases of neglect, and to be confident in distinguishing neglect from poverty, and understanding the relationship between these factors.
- Training will be available via Wolverhampton Safeguarding Together.
- Supervision, consultation and reflection are central in supporting staff around identifying and responding to neglect.

[WeCAN Screening Tool](#) and [WeCAN Assessment](#):

- Where there is a concern that neglect is a factor in a family a [WeCAN Screening Tool](#) should be completed.
- If a referral to MASH24 (Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub) is to occur regarding neglect, the [WeCAN Screening Tool](#) must be submitted alongside an EMARF.
- Where there are escalating concerns around neglect, a [WeCAN Assessment](#) should be completed by the Lead Professional or Social Worker.
- In cases of cumulative harm of neglect, it is expected that the [WeCAN Assessment](#) will be used to evidence the impact of the concerns.

Management of Neglect cases:

- Where a need has been identified following the assessment, the [Wolverhampton Thresholds of Need and Support](#) document will determine the level of support and further action required. This will support a shift away from short term crisis management towards effective intervention support for children, young people, and their families at an early stage.
- Partners are committed to recognise and respond to neglect in line with national and local protocol and share information in an evidenced informed way, which could include photographs, chronologies etc.
- Strategy meetings should always consider the need for a child protection medical in consultation with the child protection paediatrician.

Key outcomes:

- Ensure that the WeCAN Screening Tool and WeCAN Assessment are embedded in practice across agencies.
- Increase robust evidence-based referrals underpinned by the utilisation of [WeCAN Screening Tool](#) and [WeCAN Assessment](#).

- Increase in early support relating to neglect to prevent escalation to Children's Social Care.
- Reduction in the number of Family Help Plans that involve neglect and escalate to Child Protection.
- Reduction in the number of Child Protection plans relating to neglect.
- Reduction in the number of children needing to become a Child or Young Person in Care due to neglect.
- Increasing practitioner awareness of poverty informed practice.
- Multi-agency plans in relation to neglect demonstrate [Think Family](#).

These will be measured through the analysis of existing data and single / multi-agency audits.

Useful links

Start again syndrome

- Involves the failure to undertake systematic review and analysis of information about the child and adequate consideration of accumulative harm from ongoing exposure to chronic neglect.
- Link: [Start again syndrome](#)

Disguised compliance / working with resistance

- ‘Disguised compliance’ involves a parent or carer giving the appearance of co-operating with child welfare agencies to avoid raising suspicions, to allay professionals’ concerns and to diffuse professional intervention.
- Link: [NSPCC Learning – Disguised Compliance](#)

Professional curiosity

- Professional curiosity is the capacity and communication skill to explore and understand what is happening to children and within a family, rather than making assumptions or accepting initial explanations. This can be described as the need for practitioners to practice ‘respectful uncertainty’ and being open to exploring different understandings.
- Document: [7-minute briefing](#)

Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel Annual Reports: [2022/2023](#) and [2023/2024](#)

[Department for Education: Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2011 to 2014](#)

[Domestic Abuse Act](#)

[ICON website](#)

[National review into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson](#)

[Neglect](#) - West Midlands Regional Procedures

[Regional Child Protection Procedures West Midlands](#)

[S17 Protocol](#)

[The relationship between poverty, child abuse and neglect: an evidence review](#)

Bywaters, P. et al. (2016)

[Think Family](#)

[WeCAN Assessment](#)

[WeCAN Screening Tool](#)

[Wolverhampton Thresholds of Need and Support](#)

[Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023](#)

[WST Escalation Policy](#)