VULNERABLE CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE IN BARNET:

WHAT DO WE KNOW?
Starting Points for Action

**A report by the Barnet Vulnerable Children
and Young People Leading Edge Group
(VCLEG)**

April 2013

Introduction

The Vulnerable CYP Leading Edge Group comprises an invited group of professionals representing the following Barnet agencies:

- Educational Psychology Team
- High Incidence Support Team
- Narrowing the Gap Team
- 14-19 Team
- Excellence in Clusters
- Multi-Agency Support Team
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
- Corporate Parenting Team
- Safeguarding and Social Care (invited)
- PVI and maintained sector early years providers
- Youth Support Service
- Voluntary Sector
- Schools

Who is vulnerable?

All CYP and young people (CYP) are, by nature of being CYP, vulnerable at some point and at some level. That said, some CYP are at increased risk of vulnerability because of the social, socio-economic, cognitive, ethnic, linguistic or health related factors impacting on themselves, their families or their contexts.

According to the Equalities Act (2010), vulnerable groups include:

- disabled pupils and those who have SEN
- boys
- girls
- groups of pupils whose prior attainment may be different from that of other groups
- those who are academically more or less able
- pupils for whom English is an additional language
- minority ethnic pupils
- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children
- looked after children
- pupils known to be eligible for free school meals
- lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender pupils
- young carers
- pupils from low income backgrounds
- other vulnerable groups

Oona (aged 10 years) lives with her parents and 3 sisters, Lizzy aged 8 years old, Saffron aged 6 years old, and Christina 4 years old. Saffron has Downs Syndrome as well as a number of other health problems. The family are fairly isolated with no extended family living locally. Both parents work full-time.

In recent months, Oona has been increasingly reluctant to come to school. She insists on staying with her mother. In school, she does not want to be in class. She is not taking part in activities she enjoys, in or outside school. There are an increasing number of days when she is not coming to school at all. The Inclusion Manager at school is unclear about whether the underlying problem is at home or at school, but its effects appear to be impacting on Oona's schooling as well as her emotional and social development. Oona says she does not know what is upsetting her, but she has recently started to present as fragile and at times tearful. Oona used to present as an independent child, but currently she seems to be having difficulty separating from her mother. She also does not seem to be eating properly and this is getting worse.

In addition, we would include:

- any CYP at points of transition or transfer
- CYP who are NEET (not in education, employment or training) or at risk of NEET
- those for whom the raised participation age (DfE, March 2013) is more challenging than for their peers.

The DfE defines 'vulnerable' groups as those CYP:

- who have teenage or lone parents;
- living with parents who have significant and ongoing health/disability issues;
- experiencing or having experienced domestic violence;
- with parents who have alcohol or substance misuse problems;
- with developmental/learning difficulties (or their siblings);
- with emotional and behavioural problems (or their siblings);
- living in temporary accommodation;
- living in poverty

The concept of vulnerability is a difficult one to determine. In this report, vulnerability is considered in terms of its impact on a child's education and longer-term life chances, including employability. Some factors can be seen to predispose vulnerability, such as poverty or being new to English. Others may emerge more unexpectedly, as in bereavement, illness or sudden changes in family circumstance. Vulnerability is increased during periods of disruption, change and transition.

> Child A through conversation with the nursery worker disclosed that her mum gets upset when dad comes around and shouts at mum. The nursery had confronted mum with this and when the 2 year project coordinator visited the nursery, the family was referred to Home-Start Barnet. Mum had also talked to nursery assistant re younger child's challenging behaviour. During the home visit the Coordinator identified issues regarding past DV, earlier bereavement, mum's isolation and challenging behaviour of 2 yr old.

The overriding issue for the VCLEG is to determine how the effects of vulnerability can be mitigated or moderated in order to afford vulnerable CYP equality of opportunity and experience. The aim of the group is to help those working with vulnerable CYP to respond effectively and efficiently to address their needs.

The purpose of this report is to bring together the principles, practice and experience of a range of groups/ agencies/ providers in outlining what works, and beginning to develop indicators of best practice within Barnet. The remit of this work includes CYP ranging in age from conception to, in some cases, the age of 25.

Identification of vulnerability

Vulnerability can become visible in different contexts, for example at the individual, group/family or institutional levels. As well as this, there is variability in onset (i.e. whether the factor is long-term or sudden), intensity, frequency, transience and appearance. Because of this, it would be impossible to define a general set of criteria for vulnerability which could be applied universally. And even if it were possible to do so, there would be a significant proportion of CYP who would miss 'qualification' but whose situation would still render them vulnerable.

Identification of vulnerability in some CYP will be through their day-to-day presentation. This will be dependent on the observation of those working most closely with them. Effective identification thus relies on the perception of the observer to notice, for example, some of the following factors:

Changes in the CYP:

- disposition, mood and attitudes
- health
- relationships
- attendance pattern at school
- performance and progress
- physical appearance or presentation

as well as:

- specific SEN related issues
- non-engagement with services.

However, opportunities for close observation or monitoring will vary from phase to phase. For example, a secondary school teacher may have less contact with a CYP than a primary school teacher. Any transitional change, for example from primary to secondary school, or on leaving statutory education, is likely to increase a CYP's vulnerability. It is vital that well-developed planning takes prior account of this.

Other indicators of vulnerability are those which are well documented but may not be immediately visible in an individual child. The impact and intensity of these factors is variable at the child, group/family and institution levels. Some such indicators are:

- Looked after CYP and those on the edge of care
- free school meals and those in poverty
- non-specific SEN and low attainers
- EAL learners
- refugees and new arrivals to the UK
- ethnicity
- CYP who are mobile
- CYP experiencing domestic violence
- substance misuse in the individual CYP and/or the family
- mental health problems in the individual CYP and/or the family
- family discord and bereavement
- teenage parents
- NEETs
- CYP who are homeless
- Young Offenders and those with ASBOs
- CYP at risk of permanent exclusion or those who have been excluded

> The Learning Mentor at Adina's Primary School decided to undertake a CAF in relation to Adina and her family, following her mother's attempted suicide, as she was concerned that Adina's needs had gone under the radar. She was unaware that Adina was a young carer prior to the incident. The Learning Mentor felt that the CAF would help to get a clearer understanding of the family's needs and strengths and would help to get other relevant agencies on board. The Learning Mentor took on the CAF Lead Professional role.

Who can identify?

As well as parents, agencies and professionals in direct or close contact with CYP are in a strong position to identify risk. For CYP of school age, these are likely to include school staff as well as social workers, GPs, voluntary agencies etc. For pre-school CYP, these may include childminders, health visitors, GPs and childcare staff. With such a wide range of potential contributions to the identification process, it is vital that there is co-ordinated sharing of information, a common understanding and a joint approach is employed and that no child is able to 'fall through the net'. While there will be times where single-agency intervention is appropriate, emergent factors may trigger the future involvement of other agencies.

Common Assessment Framework (CAF)

The Pre-CAF assessment checklist is a helpful tool to enable agencies to decide whether a child is vulnerable, or at risk of not meeting their potential in a number of areas. The Pre-CAF can then help to determine whether a child's needs can be addressed independently, or whether a multi-agency response is required. If the issues are wider than can be tackled by one agency alone, the CAF should be undertaken with the consent of the family. The CAF allows an holistic assessment of the child and family's needs and strengths, supports information sharing between the family and the other agencies involved, and helps to coordinate a multi-agency response.

> Following his permanent exclusion, the student attended the pupil referral unit. His initial assessments indicated that he was above average ability and school information predicted that he would achieve at least 5 GCSEs at grade C or above. He responded well to mentoring and one to one sessions during which he opened up about the effect that the breakdown of his parents' marriage had on him. It also became apparent that his mum was not coping at home and he was taking care of his younger sibling fairly regularly – taking her to school and picking her up-which accounted for his erratic punctuality. He was also doing the shopping and cooking and cleaning at home. A referral was made to the Targeted Youth Service who did a home visit. This led to a referral to a parenting support course for his mother. The school organised a CAF for the student as he also agreed to attend counselling to address his emotional needs. Regular review meetings were held to discuss his progress.

What is the consequence of being vulnerable?

Professionals in Barnet report some of the following:

- slower attainment and rates of progress than peers
- low levels of emotional wellbeing and engagement
- risk of family breakdown
- low self esteem and poor self image
- reduced life chances and increased likelihood of becoming NEET
- school, social and family exclusion
- poor health
- increased likelihood of exhibiting bullying behaviour or being bullied

However, research indicates that some CYP facing the same situations as others are more resilient and better able to cope and the impact of risk factors as above can be less significant. So how can we support CYP to become more resilient?

Views of the VCLEG

Professionals attending VCLEG meetings over the academic years 2011/13 were asked to consider what works in relation to improving outcomes for vulnerable CYP and young people, and what the challenges are. The following areas were highlighted:

What works?

- data availability
- early identification and intervention
- provision of support/mentors for CYP and young people
- effective monitoring of progress and attainment
- collaboration and co-operation between stakeholders
- developing the workforce
- having high expectations and raising aspirations
- availability of specialist support
- training and support for parents
- availability of and access to curriculum enrichment opportunities/ vocational curricula
- training for professionals/CPD for all
- information sharing
- good multi-agency working
- non-duplication of services
- provision of support
- mentors for families, i.e. Family Focus

> Through effective support, the young person completed the full 26 week programme and
>
> - Learnt to decipher her feelings and know the difference between frustration, having a bad day and being angry
> - Discovered what her triggers were in terms of what gets her upset
> - Learnt not to give up at the first stumbling block and to give things a try
> - Created her own strategies for dealing with different and difficult life situations
> - Started to wear less make up that she had used as a 'mask'
> - Researched different career paths and identified what she wanted to do next
> - Fill out college applications
> - Learnt how to reflect on situations and move forward
> - Grown in confidence.

Challenges

These are the areas in which members of the VCLEG feel there are opportunities in Barnet for improvement and development. These must be considered within the context of changes to the working relationships with and within schools, following the Education Act (2010.)

Communication and identification

- hearing/listening to the voice of vulnerable CYP and families
- sharing information with all those involved
- working in beneficial and trusting partnerships
- establishing protocols for communication, for example between sectors
- addressing concerns about labelling and misidentification
- encouraging and supporting schools who may be reluctant to use the CAF process
- sharing knowledge about the needs of different vulnerable groups and ways to support them
- ensuring that CYP do not go 'under the radar'

Data issues

- sharing information within the constraints of safeguarding, data protection and intervention
- using data effectively to support seamless transitions
- preventing data discrepancies and inaccuracies

Engaging with hard-to-reach groups

- preventing a 'revolving door' approach to complex cases
- engaging parents who may be hard to reach for a range of reasons
- identifying and engaging with hardcore NEETS
- cultural barriers to support
- meeting the needs of families just below thresholds
- providing for multiple factors, i.e. CYP and young people who are FSM and SEN
- reducing the stigma attached to being vulnerable, low achieving, disabled or poor

Multi-agency working

- ensuring that' too many cooks' do not lead to gaps, ie where everyone is responsible but nobody is responsible

Resourcing Issues

- limiting the Impact of budget constraints
- managing accommodation issues
- limiting the impact of a shortage of key professionals
- limiting the impact of constraints on recruitment of trained staff within the current employment climate

Next steps

This project has highlighted opportunities for meeting the challenges facing vulnerable CYP and young people in Barnet. We know what works, as outlined above, and while we need to make sure that those practices are shared and known, the group has also identified a range of factors which may be useful in accelerating improvements in Barnet even further.

These include:

- improving analysis of data/contexts
- improving shared assessment and joint practice
- development work, for example of preventative work, of provision, or use of Pupil Premium
- improve motivation to engage and access for hard-to-reach groups
- improving partnership working, for example by increasing knowledge and developing shared knowledge between agencies
- improving collaboration across the CYP's Service, within and between schools
- improving collaboration and working practices with outside agencies
- Team Around The Setting
- CAF

The next task for the VCLEG will be to develop a good practice guide/toolkit to support practitioners in answer to the question, "What do you, as a professional, do when you come across a vulnerable child?"

Hannah Lethbridge and John Paxton
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April 2013