

Child neglect in 2011

Summary of recommendations for the UK government

An annual review by Action for Children in partnership with the University of Stirling

lonely. care. outsider. **neglect** outcast. upset. c
ignored. captive. lonely. smelly. misery. starvation

Suicidal. Smelly. Outcast. unheard. abuse. pain. hunger. depression. self harm. outsider. love. heartless. neglect...

Introduction

Childhood neglect is a major feature of life in the UK. The proportion of children who experience neglect remains at an unacceptably high level. It is unacceptable first and foremost because neglect ruins the lives and potential of children, but also because it is within our power to do something about it.

Neglect is extremely damaging to children. Of all forms of abuse, neglect can have some of the worst and most long-term effects on the brain, physical development, behaviour, educational achievement and emotional wellbeing.

Neglect robs children of the childhood they deserve and leaves broken families, dashed aspirations and misery in its wake. In the most severe cases, children die – of starvation for example, or from accidents. While we know more about the causes and consequences of neglect than ever before, it remains the biggest reason for a child to need protection. Our review has found that too many children experience neglect throughout large parts of their childhood and that they do not get the help they need when they need it.

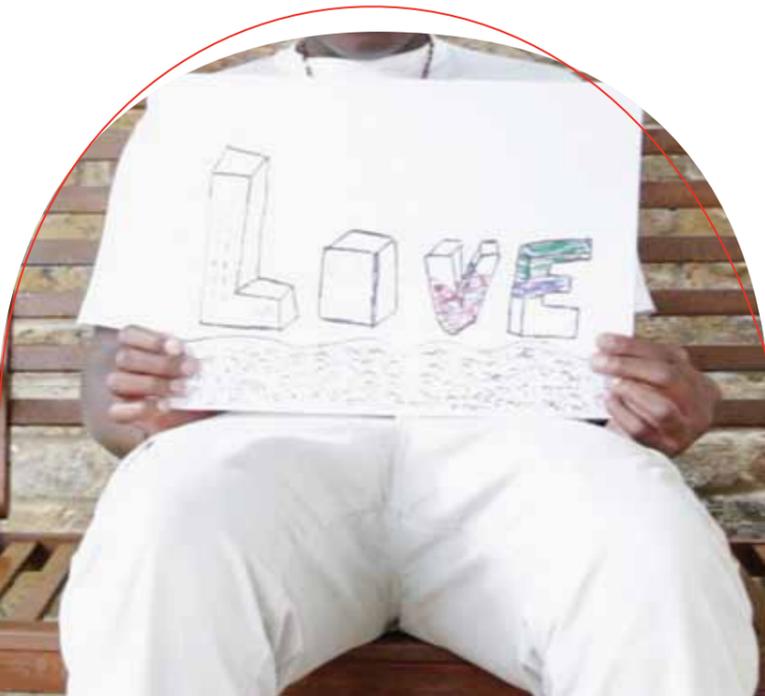
Our research findings show that while there have been positive changes in public awareness and some pockets of good local practice have developed, there is a long way to go before we can expect a significant improvement for neglected children.

Systems in place across the UK to assess, monitor and record the needs of local children do not work for child neglect. Without changes to the ways in which individual, area and national data are collected we cannot hope to provide the strategic and comprehensive responses required, or indeed to know that local practice is making a difference.

The public need clarity about what constitutes neglect, both to support their own parenting and to inform them if they are concerned about others. Too often parents are not aware of the support services that are available in their area.

While awareness of neglect is increasing, we now face the stark reality that the majority of social workers feel powerless to help. The critical challenge now is to galvanise an effective, integrated and early response to neglected children at a local level.

Local child protection and safeguarding systems have been shown to stand in the way of appropriate assessments for neglected children, and can act as a barrier to effective early help. This must be urgently addressed. At the same time, we need a rebalance in local, community-based provision to provide early help as well as crisis responses.



Why an annual review?

If we want to improve the way neglect is tackled we have to be able to measure whether our collective response is getting better or worse year on year.

This report sets out the findings of our 2011 review of child neglect. Our comprehensive review is the first of a series to gauge the current situation for neglected children across the UK and monitor the effects of changes in national and local policy and practice. It enables us to fill in the gaps that currently exist about the situation for, and response to, neglected children.

We will use the findings to inform our work and do all we can to influence the public and policy makers alike to improve the way child neglect is tackled across the UK.

Between March and August 2011 we gathered evidence from the public and professionals, in a range of ways:

- A telephone survey was undertaken in 35 local authorities (boards in Northern Ireland) across the UK and via email in a further 12¹
- In-depth, on-site focus groups were undertaken in six areas across the UK²

- 2062 adults in the general public responded to an online poll³
- A total of 2,174 professionals responded to an online poll (1,177 primary school staff, 140 pre-school/nursery staff and 329 health professionals)
- 282 social workers and 246 police officers also gave their views⁴
- The findings from 2011 were also compared with similar polls commissioned by Action for Children in 2009⁵ to see if there had been any changes
- We collated published statistics from across the UK and internationally⁶
- We analysed policy developments across the four nations of the UK

Findings

Neither government nor local authorities know how many children are currently experiencing neglect

Neglect is the main reason why children become subject to a child protection plan, but our research shows that neither local authorities nor national governments know how many children are experiencing neglect.

Neglect is the main reason for child protection registrations in the UK:

- Neglect is the primary or contributory reason in 46% of cases in England, 44% in Scotland, 43% in Wales and 50% in Northern Ireland.

Of the 47 local areas we surveyed, only 21 collect data about the prevalence of neglect other than required data on child protection plans (or registration in Scotland). And of these 21 areas, most only reported on official child protection figures rather than from other sources.

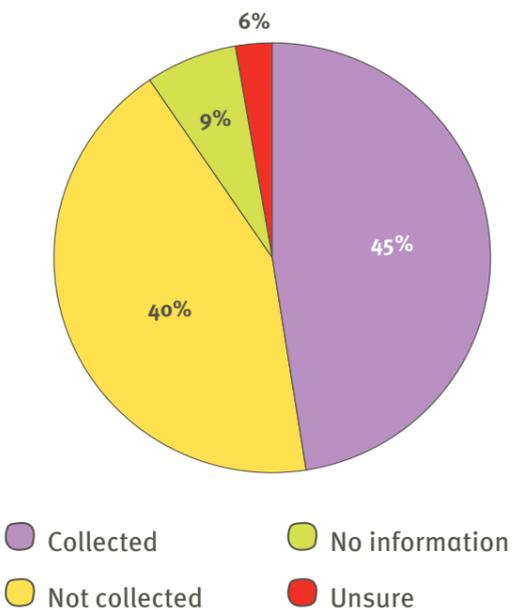
The research also shows that local areas all collect data in different ways and that there are problems with accuracy.

Even if completely accurate, these official statistics underestimate the reality of children's experience because many neglected children do not end up on official 'lists'. Studies suggest that up to 10 per cent of all children experience neglect (nearly 1.5 million across the UK).

Because neglect is so often associated with parental mental health problems, substance misuse and domestic abuse, we asked in our survey whether information is recorded locally about the children of parents who come to the attention of adult services. In most areas this was not readily available or routinely collected.

Unless we have proper information about the number of children who are experiencing neglect (both locally and nationally) it will continue to be impossible to plan effective services to meet the needs of neglected children. National governments must take a lead in making this happen and must use the data to inform national policies.

Areas collecting statistics over and above child protection register statistics: results from telephone survey⁷



hurt. Outsider. Misfit. alone. quiet. care. love. loneliness. sad. Upset. unloved. invisible. ignorede. forgotten. neglect...

The public are increasingly worried about child neglect, but do not always report it

Fifty-two per cent of the members of the public we polled said they have worried about the welfare or safety of a child they know or who is living in their area. This figure has increased by eight per cent since 2009, which suggests either there is more neglect, more people are aware of it or both.

Ninety-four per cent said people should become involved if they had concerns about neglect. Yet of those who had been worried about a child, only 62 per cent felt worried enough to tell someone about their concerns.

Many people (38%) did not feel worried enough to tell anyone. This is not because they are afraid of repercussions or feel that it is not their business (as was the case in 2009), but rather because of concerns about a lack of evidence or uncertainty about whether neglect is actually occurring. Of those who had spoken to someone, they tended to speak to partners or family, with 26 per cent turning to social services and 19 per cent to the police.

So while it is encouraging that the general public is potentially willing to seek help for neglected children, it is worrying that a lack of certainty is holding them back. Thirty-seven per cent of people would like more information about who to contact if they have a concern. This is a significant increase from the 23 per cent recorded in 2009.



Professionals in universal services are increasingly aware of neglect

Of the staff that we spoke to in universal services (primary school teachers, pre-school and nursery staff and health professionals) 81 per cent have come across children they suspect have been neglected (compared to 78% in 2009). Focus group participants said that over the last two or three years practitioners have become increasingly aware of neglect. Encouragingly, most of the practitioners we spoke to appear to have heard the message that it is important to identify neglected children at an early stage.

Across the UK, locally based multi-agency systems and groups have been set up to discuss children and families identified as needing extra help. But although there are initiatives in place to improve the identification of children, many children are still slipping through the net.

Neither is enough attention paid to the impact of services and whether they make a difference to the lives of neglected children.

'There is good recognition now when neglect is more overt, but still not enough at the less obvious stage. Social workers need to be able to spend more time actually with families to really see what is going on in the home.'

Focus group respondent

Focus group respondents suggested that social care agencies are so inundated with referrals that the children who need help the most are not identified as quickly as they should be. There was also concern that as a result of squeezed services and higher case loads, staff will have less time to spend with families making neglectful situations harder to identify.

ignorede . hungry . forgotten . hurt . alone . outcast . sadness . misery . outsider . love . quiet . careless . struggle . neglect...

Social workers and other professionals feel powerless to help

All too often children have to endure a chronic lack of physical and emotional care over long periods before they receive help. Practitioners such as teachers and health visitors find it difficult to get a response to their concerns and social workers can become caught up in procedural issues. All are in danger of losing sight of the child. Key to effective help for children is that their plight is spotted early and that something is done quickly to help them. Yet in practice this is still not happening.

We found that 36 per cent of police officers and 51 per cent of social workers have felt powerless to intervene when they have suspected a child is being neglected. For social workers this figure has risen from just over a third since 2009.

The main barriers they gave were:

- the point at which they could intervene was too high (42% for social workers, 23% for police officers)
- the child's needs met the threshold but there were 'insufficient services' or 'insufficient resources' to act (43% and 52% respectively for social workers, 28% and 30% for police officers)

The twin pressures of needing to meet a definition of seriousness and of scarce resources can result in professionals in universal services feeling that there is little point in referring families if their need is not perceived to be very high. Thus we have created a situation of greater understanding about the effects of neglect, and greater willingness to report concerns, but have constructed frustrating structural barriers to providing that help. This has a devastating effect upon children who remain at risk of significant harm.

As in 2009, professionals in universal roles stated that the most helpful improvement would be if they were able to report less serious suspicions before they get worse (41% of health professionals, 46% of pre-school and nursery staff and 55% of primary school staff).

Too many children are recognised but not helped

There are large numbers of children about whom a range of people may be concerned and who are known to communities and professionals but who are not actually receiving adequate help. Rather than slipping through the net, they are, in effect, stuck in it.

'Constant service restructuring means staff changes which are detrimental to both families, who have to make new relationships, and to other agencies who have to relearn who they need to contact with concerns about children. Staff turnover in some services can also be a major problem.'

Focus group respondent

Teachers report sleepless nights wondering what they should do; health visitors talk of their frustration in trying to make referrals to social services. For some people, the only way to reduce the anxiety is to stop recognising the problem in the first place.

Some services operate a system where missed appointments can lead to families returning to the end of waiting lists. Child neglect is associated with families who often have very chaotic lives and suffer severe economic and emotional pressures.

Parents in these kinds of situations have the most to gain from specialist support, but are also the most likely to miss appointments, especially if no relationship has been established with a practitioner.

Respondents in the survey described children and families who 'bounce' in and out of services which are in place for a short time and then withdraw when the urgency recedes. This clear need for longer-term support has not filtered through to service planning or provision.



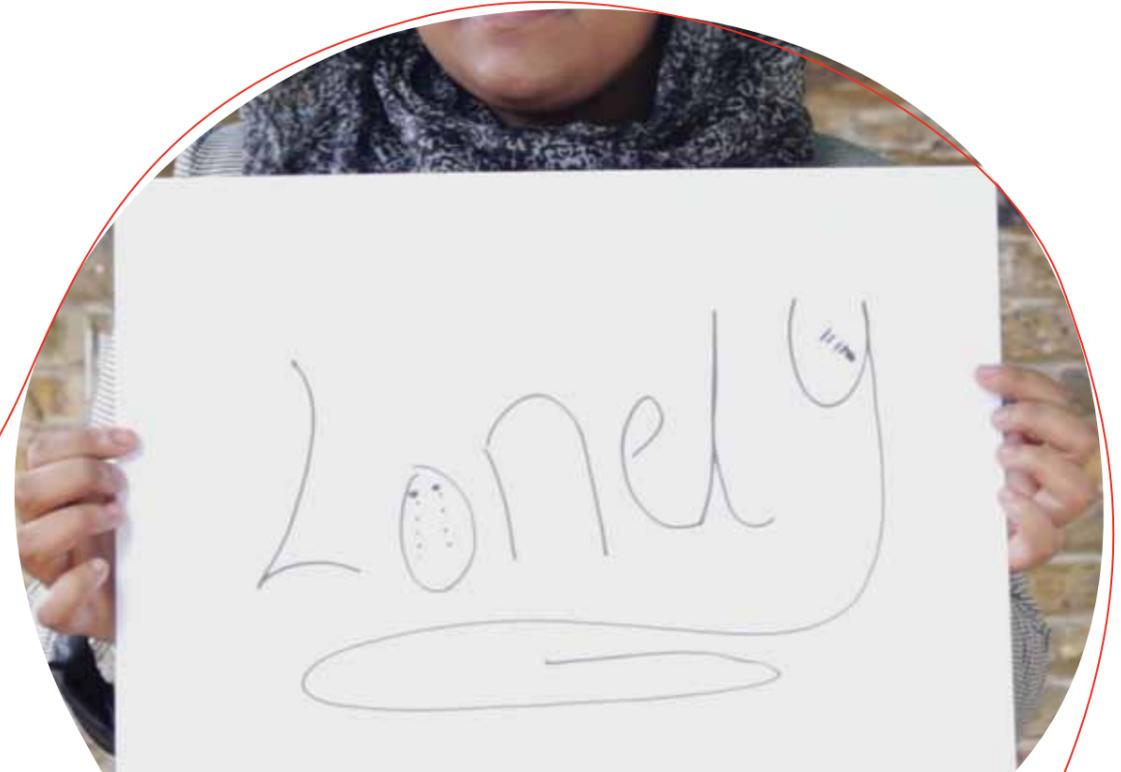
starvation. attention. alone. care. love. stress. invisible. smell. forgotten. hurt. alone. outcast. sadness. neglect...

The child protection system is not designed to assess neglect

Neglected children suffer from the influence of a forensic investigative system. This system, as embedded in The Children Act 1989, typically involves swift investigative processes that are designed to look for 'hard' evidence of abuse. This is not helpful for cases of neglect.

Neglect is often unpredictable and cumulative. It involves harm of an emotional nature and where the nature of the harm is in itself to do with parenting being erratic. These kinds of situation call for careful assessment and analysis that is not necessarily encapsulated within 'investigation'.

Neglected children would benefit from a system that recognises that timescales will vary for different children.



Insufficient services and the impact of cuts

Front-line practitioners have told us that there are not enough services to offer help to all the children at risk of, or experiencing, neglect. This view was clear from both the poll results (which showed that 43% of social workers and 28% of police officers thought that the lack of services was a barrier to helping children) and from participants in all the focus groups.

'We know as social workers that early intervention can make a difference but it is still a challenge to get families into services early, especially when services are scarce. Families' circumstances are getting more difficult with the impact of welfare reforms and funding cuts mean that it will be harder for children to be accepted by services for help.'

Focus group respondent

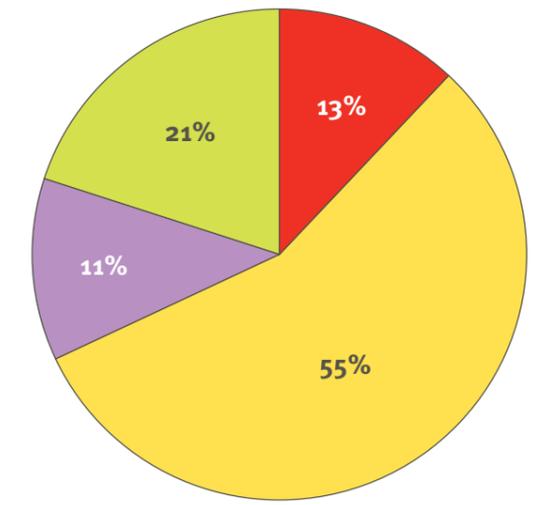
Across all agencies practitioners are worried that, where funding cuts have not yet happened, they will be made in the future, and where cuts have been made, more will follow, meaning that some services will close and budgets will be squeezed in others.

This view came across clearly in the focus groups and is backed up by evidence in the poll which showed that 80 per cent of social workers, 51 per

cent of police officers and 44 per cent of primary school staff think that cuts will make it more difficult to intervene.

It was thought that cuts will have a negative impact on the numbers of children who can be helped and the ways in which they can be helped, for example the length of time support can be offered. Our review also identified a gap in services for adults affected by substance misuse, mental health problems and domestic abuse.

Adequacy of services in place: results from telephone survey



- adequate
- adequate but worried about future funding
- adequate, improving but worried about future funding
- inadequate

forgotten. suicidal. bullied. humiliated. misfit. loneliness. careless. struggle. suffering. alone. sad. neglect...

What can decision makers do to help neglected children?

Improve data collection about the scale of neglect and the effectiveness of services

There is clearly a need for more consistent statistical reporting methods across the UK, not least so that services can be planned to best address the needs of children. In 2010–11, the Department of Education reviewed the Children in Need (CiN) census and is now looking at it again in light of the Munro review. Decisions must be taken to ensure data on neglect is effectively collected and used to inform local decision-making and national policy.

Just as it is important to collect better data about the scale of neglect, it is also important to dedicate far more attention and resource to ensuring that the services we do offer are effective and meet children and families' needs. There needs to be a far more integrated and overarching approach to outcomes measurement if we are to ensure that our now increasingly scarce resources are not being wasted.

Develop an integrated and responsive system

It is the chronic nature of neglect that is known to be so damaging to children. Yet neglect, as defined by the current system, has become overly complicated with many delays and barriers to children receiving a swift and coordinated response.

The coalition Government has introduced several measures to reduce bureaucracy. These should be supported by a further breaking down of barriers between universal and statutory services, the roll-out of new training materials and a re-examination of the statutory guidance to allow all the key professionals the space and time to undertake a full and proper assessment that includes analysing, forming and testing hypotheses and conclusions. Much of this has been recommended by the Munro review, but for neglect specifically it is vital that these recommendations are put into action.

Enable the general public and professionals to respond to concerns earlier

The public needs more information that describes the signs of neglect and offers reassurance about the benefits of seeking help for children even when not absolutely certain about their worries. Several government announcements have been made to support early intervention. However it is not clear where the resources are coming from for a radical shift to early intervention, especially as the Early Intervention Grant in England amounts to less than all the former funding streams.

We welcome the Munro review's⁹ recommendation on the need to introduce a duty on all local services

to coordinate an 'early offer' of help to families who do not meet the criteria for social care to help address problems before they escalate. But there is no evidence of a swift government response to this recommendation.

Do not allow cuts to derail good initiatives

What is needed are services that parents feel do not stigmatise them, which build positive and trusting relationships with them and which they can return to if they need further help at a later stage, but which are authoritative in their focus on reducing neglect. Budget cuts to services for children and families are a false economy.

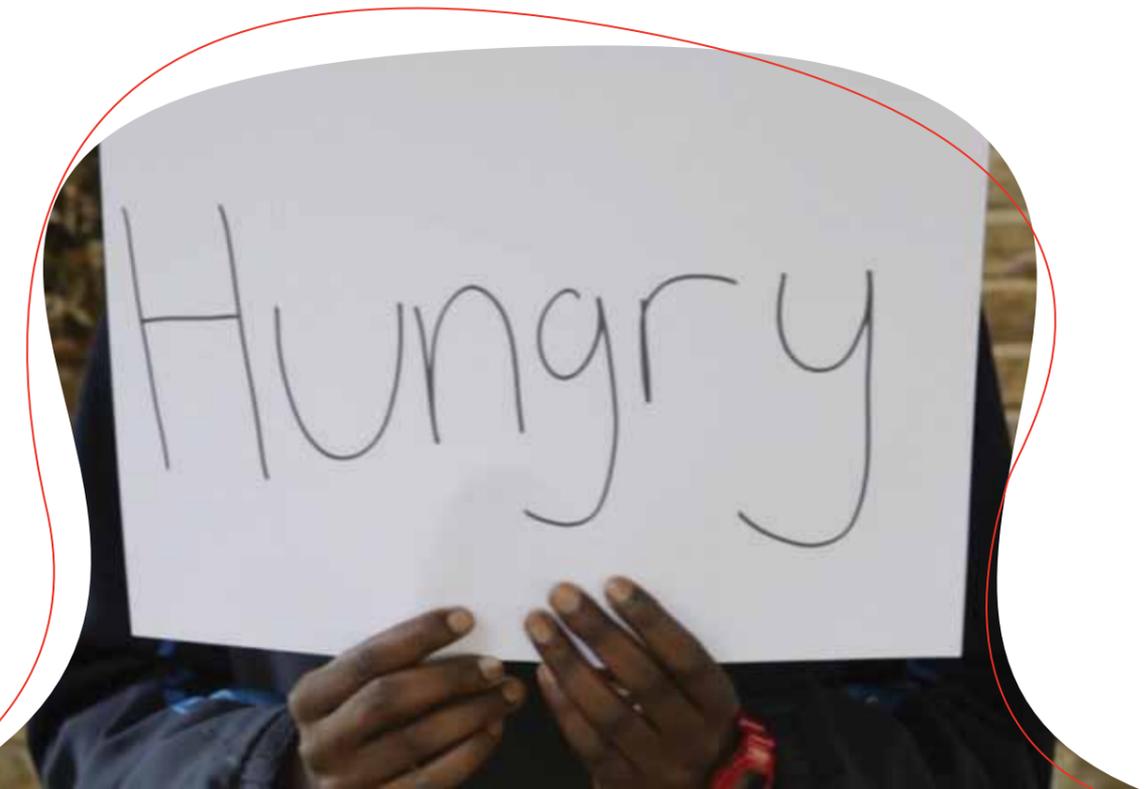
Action for Children's commitment

Action for Children provides a number of services to overcome child neglect. We know that if we can intervene at an early stage, what makes the most difference is providing a trusting relationship with parents who need additional support so that they can develop their skills and confidence.

We provide these services in all the communities in which we work, operating in partnership with other local voluntary agencies as well as local authority and NHS services and schools. We show the difference we make through the production of local report cards and a national report on the impact of our services.

We are committed to increasing knowledge about what works in addressing child neglect. We are currently undertaking a four-year longitudinal study of our UK neglect intervention projects¹⁰ as well as developing new services to provide relationship-based support for vulnerable families.

As part of our ongoing 'Take your action for children' neglect campaign we are seeking funds for a centre of child neglect expertise and will conduct this UK review of child neglect on an annual basis.



down. small. careless. struggle. suffering. alone. attention. alone. care. love. stress. invisible. smell. neglect...

Recommendations for the UK Government

The Government must help local areas improve data collection about the scale of neglect and the effectiveness of services

- 1. The Department for Education must revise the Children in Need census to improve local authority data collection about child neglect.¹¹
- 2. The Department of Health must update the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment framework to include the numbers of Children in Need in the core data set.¹²
- 3. The Department for Education must amend the Working Together statutory guidance to give professionals more space and time for full and proper assessments to tackle chronic child neglect.

The Government must co-ordinate local services in order to encourage parents and the public to act early on concerns of neglect

- 1. As a part of the advice all new parents receive from maternity services and within their personal child health record, they also should be given information about the local parenting support services available to them.

The Government must increase children and families' access to effective early support services

- 1. In line with the Munro review 2011 the Government should clarify and improve duties for local authorities and statutory partners to provide sufficient local early help services.
- 2. Early support services need to be there for the long term. In the drive to reform public services commissioning arrangements must be revised so that any new family support initiative for children and young people must be funded for at least five years.

Endnotes

- 1. The survey asked about the ways in which children with unmet needs could come to the attention of someone in a position to help, and the nature and funding security of the services for children and their families
- 2. Focus group participants included practitioners from children's services, health service staff, Local Safeguarding Children's Board members, third sector, police, housing and education
- 3. YouGov panel, field work 3–22 June 2011, figures weighted and representative of all UK adults (aged 18+)
- 4. Through the YouGov panel, with field work 13–21 June 2011
- 5. Through a YouGov panel among 2496 professionals with field work August 2009
- 6. Information was gathered on 'official' statistics and about children affected by parental substance misuse, domestic abuse and mental health problems. Statistics collated by international bodies such as WHO and UNICEF were also scrutinised
- 7. Shows areas collecting statistics over and above child protection register statistics, from the survey with local authorities
- 8. Shows views on the adequacy of services in place from the telephone survey with local authorities
- 9. Munro E, *The Munro Review of Child protection: Final Report A child centred system* (2011)
- 10. The evaluation is being undertaken by the University of Salford
- 11. The government must continue to collate and publish data from the CiN census reporting on neglect and abuse, including collecting information on neglect as part of the information sets: 'referrals to children's social care' and 'children becoming the subject of a child protection plan'. The reasons for referral, or for becoming subject to a child protection plan, should be separated out to clearly identify figures on neglect. The CiN data set should include an information item on 'early or later indicators of neglect are addressed and concern about a child or young person is reduced'
- 12. The Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) should include numbers of children with children in need status under the domain 'Social Services', sub-domain 'Numbers'

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Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

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