

Victoria Climbié Foundation Statement following Baby P convictions

On a day when much of the country was remembering its war dead, a team of jurors returned their verdicts on those responsible for the death of a child, and one particular soldier had his attention diverted by the case of Baby P. Like many others, he felt an immediate need to talk to someone about his feelings and contacted the foundation.

"I am a soldier, nothing special I know, but I have seen my fair share of misery. But nothing has reduced me to tears so much as this latest case in Haringey. He [Baby P] felt more pain than I have ever endured and he endured it for such a long time as well."

VCF – The Victoria Climbié Foundation is equally saddened by yet another tragic story of a child death that could have been prevented, in a case that may yet prove to be worse than Victoria Climbié.

The child, currently known as Baby P, was placed on Haringey's Child Protection register nine months before he was found dead in his cot on 3 August last year following months of chronic abuse and neglect. A post mortem revealed he had a broken back, eight fractured ribs, missing fingernails and toenails, multiple bruises and an injury to the inside of his mouth. He had also swallowed one of his own teeth.

No one has been convicted of his murder, no one has been sacked, no one has resigned, and no one has fully apologised for his death.

Who let Baby P die?

The child's mother and her boyfriend have both been convicted of causing or allowing his death under section five of the Domestic Violence, Crime and Victims Act 2004. Another man, who had been staying with the family, has also been found guilty of the same charge. The charge – a recent change to the law – was brought in to prevent several adults blaming each other for the death of a child or vulnerable adult.

Independent reviews are currently underway in relation to this case. A Serious Case Review by Haringey's Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) has blamed legal advice taken in the week before Baby P's death for the decision not to take him into care. The review's executive summary, which looks at the statutory procedures and lessons to be learned through child deaths or serious injury, was published by Haringey on 11 November 2008.

Despite 60 known contacts with social service, police and health professionals and more than 50 injuries, the council's defence has been that no one could have protected him against deceitful carers and parents. But closer scrutiny of the case reveals that Baby P's bruising stopped when he was removed for a short while from his abusers, thus "it would not have been overly cautious to have put two and two together".

Lord Laming, who conducted a review following Victoria's death, said "It would be awful wherever it happened, but it seems particularly sad that it has happened in the same area where Victoria experienced this awful cruelty and a terrible death and involved the very same services."

Haringey Council, notable as the same borough that failed Victoria Climbié, has issued three written warnings to frontline staff, but there has been no accountability at senior management level.

'Independent' reviews

VCF has continued to highlight its concerns about serious case reviews, not least that they are internal. In November 2007 the foundation wrote to safeguarding children boards in London, to bring to the fore the need for lessons not only to be learned, but for theory to be put into practice.

In July, VCF again raised concerns about serious case reviews following the published summary into the deaths of Antoine and Keniece Ogunkoya in Hackney, a report that was condemned as 'scandalous' by the children's father and family. Their mother was convicted of manslaughter as a result of diminished responsibility on 1 August 2007 at the Central Criminal Court in London. The family are currently seeking full disclosure of this report in their quest to find out how the children died.

The executive summary of the serious case review report into the death of Baby P was published by Haringey Safeguarding Children Board on 11 November, the same date that the court verdicts were returned on his death. VCF is seeking full disclosure of this report to find out what happened, and to understand where there are similarities to other cases, as part of our working together with statutory services to ensure improvements in child protection policy and practices.

What is shocking in both cases is the claim that these reviews were independent and transparent. What VCF knew, and what has now been admitted following the Haringey report, is that the same external consultant commissioned by both local authorities was not given access to key staff or documents.

It is unacceptable in that these cases are not isolated, and the current remit of the serious case review can only continue this trend across the country. It is not mandatory for families to be consulted, and a local authority can, in effect, carry out reviews of their own department and staff, and therefore predetermine the outcome of a review.

A review of services involved in child welfare in Haringey was ordered by Ed Balls on 12 November, and VCF welcomes this urgent action by the government to look at procedural and structural failures, particularly in cases that continue to mirror that of Victoria Climbié. An England-wide independent review of child protection services was ordered by Children's Minister Beverley Hughes on the same day: a decision welcomed by VCF, and a request the foundation made to government earlier this year at its annual conference *'Victoria Climbié 8 Year On, Does Every Child Matter?'*

As in the case of Antoine and Keniece Ogunkoya, whose mother was convicted of manslaughter as a result of diminished responsibility, VCF is calling for full disclosure of the subsequent reports to find out what happened, and to understand where there are similarities to other cases.

Whilst the foundation applauds the Government for bringing about reform change - a move brought about by the Victoria Climbié Inquiry- it is calling for a review of these child protection reforms as they are clearly not working. In fact VCF was extremely vocal in calling for a review six months ago.

In calling for this review, the foundation wished to address the implementation of the child protection reforms, a concern echoed by safeguarding professionals, many of whom expressed their unease about the lack of change at operational level, with regard to a number of recent public-interest cases nationally, including Tahla Ikram, Khrya Ishaq, Antoine & Keniece Ogunkoya and now Baby P.

Call for Public Inquiry

VCF has been inundated with messages of outrage, anger, sorrow and support, amid continued media and public interest. A public call for accountability continues to gather pace and as yet has not abated.

VCF- The Victoria Climbié Foundation is calling for a public inquiry into the death of Baby P to uncover the systematic and operational failures, and why children continue to die in same or similar circumstances post-Victoria. VCF has previously called for a public inquiry into the deaths of Antoine and Keniece Ogunkoya.

The death of these children and others is punishment enough, but to deny the public the truth about the circumstances leading to the death of these children is deplorable. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of the government to ensure that the public knows what happened and know the truth – the public demands a public inquiry.

VCF hopes the failings identified by Ofsted, the Healthcare Commission and the Chief Inspector of Constabulary into Haringey Council do not detract from the need for a full public enquiry.

“The current focus on the Baby P case is an important development that could lead to another round of changes to the future of social work, specifically relating to child protection practices and regulations, in the UK.” The Journal

A question that VCF is continually being asked is: what happens when the media spotlight has shifted from this tragic case, and what can I, as an individual, do to help?

We offer you the words of Dame Donna Kinnair, a member of the Public Inquiry team led by Lord Laming in 2003. Donna is a child protection specialist, who has since worked tirelessly to deliver significant change across the country and in the boroughs that she works: “you can’t change the world overnight but you can make improvements bit by bit, which can have lasting consequences.”

It is important that each of us look within ourselves to challenge, wherever necessary, child protection practices and policies for which this foundation campaigns so vigorously and to take on our shared responsibility for the safeguarding and welfare of **all** our children.

To ensure that reform is focused on the child, we need to develop the context to establish the primacy of the child’s needs over other contending interests. We need to ensure that local community groups or service users understand the role and responsibilities of the statutory agencies and care services and in turn, that the agencies work in a manner that is transparent, respectful, and nurturing of community diversity.

As a campaigning organisation, we will be supporting the many groups, families and young people who are taking constructive and practical action to affect change.

Save a Thought for the Children

Let’s not forget Baby P, let’s not forget Antoine and Keniece Ogunkoya, and let’s not forget the many other children, too numerous to mention, such that their short lives were not in vain. Like Victoria, we owe them – and we, will continue to work with the agencies entrusted to protect our children, and with the communities that we serve in an effort to bridge the gap that still regrettably exists between them.

The Victoria Climbié Foundation was established by Mr and Mrs Climbié (Victoria's parents) to campaign for improvement in child protection policies and practices and to ensure effective links & coordination between statutory agencies, care services and BMER communities.

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