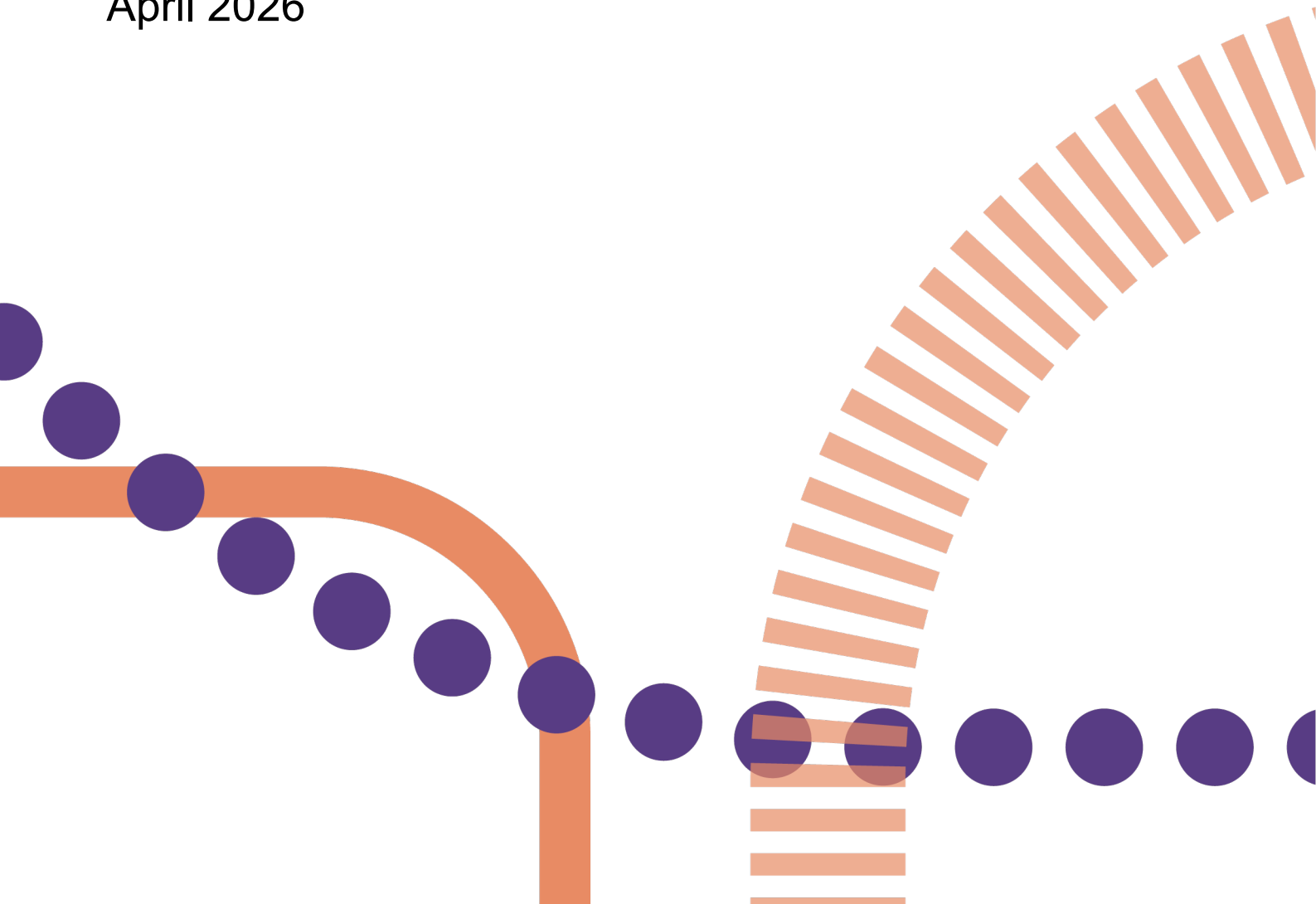


Child neglect

Voice of the child

April 2026



Introduction

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel published a thematic report in Spring 2026 examining multi-agency responses to child neglect in serious child safeguarding incidents. One of the key issues identified in the review relates to the voice of the child in safeguarding assessments. Assessments often lacked a multi-agency perspective and failed to adequately capture the child's voice. Children's views, feelings, and experiences are sometimes overlooked or misinterpreted, particularly when their behaviour is seen as problematic rather than symptomatic of unmet needs.

Who is this document for?

Multi-agency practitioners and managers working in universal services such as schools, health services, police and early years settings, and practitioners in specialist safeguarding and child protection roles (including fostering and adoption).

How to use this resource

This resource should be used as a practical guide and reflective tool to strengthen responses to child neglect, ensuring that the voice of the child is central in assessments and interventions. The resource can be used as a self-reflective tool or for discussion in team meetings or strategy discussions.

Why is it important for children and young people?

This resource is important in ensuring that the voices, feelings and lived experiences of children are central to safeguarding assessments and interventions. By promoting activities that actively listen to children, see them alone in safe spaces and consider factors such as disability, culture and communication needs, this resource helps multi-agency professionals understand what neglect feels like from a child's perspective.

What is the evidence base?

The Panel's thematic analysis included:

- Analysis of one hundred reviews and thirty-four related LCSPRs relating to neglect received by the Panel between 2019 and 2023.
- Five rapid reviews were selected for in-depth fieldwork involving practitioners, experts, and families with lived experience. Group interviews were conducted at each of the five sites, involving thirty-seven frontline practitioners who had worked directly with the children and families.
- Meetings were held with sixty senior managers from strategic groups, including education and third-sector organisations.
- Roundtable discussions brought together forty experts and leaders from health, police, education, and children's social care/ early help.

- A webinar was convened with twenty-five independent reviewers of LCSPRs and scrutineers from various safeguarding partnerships, focusing on barriers and enablers to effective practice.
- To ensure the inclusion of children and families, the review team conducted interviews with two children and one parent and held two meetings with ten parents from family advocacy groups. These discussions explored their experiences with services, what they found helpful, what they wished had been done differently, and their suggestions for improving practice.
- Policy conversations with the relevant government departments.

Key facts and figures

- In the UK, the best available evidence suggests that one in thirteen children aged 11 to 17 has experienced neglect, with one in ten reporting severe neglect during their lifetime (Radford et al., 2011).
- As of 31 March 2025, neglect was the primary concern for just over half of the 49,400 children in England subject to child protection plans (DfE, 2025).
- Neglect is a common factor in incidents involving death or serious harm. The Panel's data shows that 60% of rapid reviews included neglect as part of the broader context of children's lives (CSPRP Annual Report 24/25).

Common issues

- The voices of children are often absent from assessments.
- Assessments often lack a holistic, multi-agency perspective and may fail to adequately capture the child's voice.
- Children's views, feelings, and experiences are sometimes overlooked or misinterpreted, particularly when their behaviour is seen as problematic rather than symptomatic of unmet needs.
- Cultural and environmental contexts are also insufficiently considered, leading to assessments that may not fully reflect the child's reality. Similarly, the review highlighted that assessments often lacked depth in areas such as the impact of disability, race and religion in a child's life.
- Children are not always seen alone or in safe spaces. The child's bedroom and wider living conditions have often not been seen by professionals.

- Pre-verbal children or those with communication needs are particularly likely to be overlooked. This limits professionals' understanding of what neglect feels like from the child's perspective.
- The children and young people described feelings of fear, loneliness, and being unheard. One young adult recalled involvement from multi-agency professionals that failed to provide consistent support, leaving her feeling abandoned by both her parents and those professionals. For this young person, frequent changes to her named social worker meant that trust wasn't developed thus making her stay silent.
- Another young person described how delays in recognising her neglect prolonged the harm caused to her and left her feeling invisible.
- A lack of observation of parent-child interactions limits understanding of what neglect feels like from the child's perspective.

Hallmarks of good practice

- Children should be seen and spoken to alone in safe and age-appropriate settings. The child's living environment, including where they sleep, should be seen.
- Consideration should be given to ensuring the correct communication methods are used when engaging with young children or those with communication needs.
- Assessment should capture what neglect feels like from the child's perspective – not just from observing conditions.
- Avoid framing concerns solely around behaviour (e.g. lateness to school or aggression in classrooms) without exploring underlying experiences of care and emotional well-being.
- Consideration of how race, culture, language and disability shape children's experiences and their ability to express concerns.
- The voices of children should be reflected in plans and review whether interventions make a meaningful difference to their lives.
- Let children know how their input has influenced decisions. Provide feedback so that children feel valued and heard.
- Avoid language in assessments that inadvertently blames children for the consequences of neglect ("consistently late for school", "out of control").

Reflective questions and discussion points

- In cases of child neglect, have you seen the child/children alone in a safe, age-appropriate space? Have you seen their bedroom and wider living conditions?
- What did you learn that you may not have done with the child's parents present?
- If you have not seen the child alone, what are the plans to do so and what are the risks to further delay?
- Are you exploring opportunities to get into homes to see the conditions that children are living in?
- Have you used communication skills and methods that are suited to the child's age, culture and neuro as well as physical diversity?
- Are you framing concerns around behaviour without exploring underlying care, safety and emotional needs?
- Do your observations of children capture the quality of care (warmth, responsiveness) and not just home conditions?
- Has it been agreed who will ensure a child is seen and heard in between meetings and how will the impact be reviewed?
- If a plan of action wasn't working, what outcome would a child notice? How would it be checked with them?
- Is the parent's narrative dominating assessments? How will you triangulate with the child's account and independent observations?
- How do you feed back to the child how their views have shaped decisions and next steps?

Reflective questions for leaders

- How does our safeguarding partnership ensure that the voice of the child is consistently prioritised in safeguarding assessments and decision-making processes?
- Are there clear expectations for practitioners to see children alone in safe spaces and how is compliance monitored?
- What steps are we talking to challenge a culture where parental narratives dominate assessments?

- How do we promote curiosity and professional challenge across multi-agency working to avoid assumptions about neglect?
- How do we audit whether children's voices are reflected in plans?
- What mechanisms are in place to ensure feedback loops so that children know that their views have shaped decisions?
- Do we regularly review how agencies work together to capture an holistic picture of the child's lived experience?
- What training do we provide locally on hearing the voice of the child?
- How do we ensure that safeguarding assessments concerning neglect consider a family's intersecting factors such as poverty, race and socioeconomic context, so that assumptions or biases about families from marginalised communities do not shape the way their parenting is framed?

Case study

Four White British siblings aged between 11 and 17, were removed from the family home following concerns about the severe and inhumane conditions of the home.

- One child was found by police wandering in public, not fully dressed.
- A shared bedroom was described as having mess everywhere, no bed linen and the bed clearly infested with bed bugs and blood splatters on the walls.
- One child slept on the floor on a mattress hidden underneath mess covering the floor.
- Two siblings experienced periods of being home educated.

Learning points:

- Evidence of the children's neglect had come to light on a number of occasions but had not been triangulated.
- Practitioners had not recognised repeated behaviours such as stealing food as symptoms of neglect.
- Evidence of limited multi-agency information sharing where professionals did not exchange information or seek missing information.
- Whilst the children were seen by professionals, they were not always seen alone.
- Professionals did not "see" what the children were telling them through their behaviours, physical appearance or interrogate inconsistencies in the parents' narrative.

Where can I find out more?

Find more information on the Panel's new learning hub:

www.childsafeguarding.independent-panel.uk, where you can access videos, webinars, podcasts and other content, including the full report.

Other useful resources include:

- NSPCC: [Too little, too late: The multi-agency response to identifying and tackling neglect](#) (pages 6 to 7 apply)