

## **Safeguarding: Tips for that Difficult Conversation**

Chris Simes, Managing Director of Collingwood Learning

I am delighted to be writing this article for Council members across Yorkshire and Humber. I have had the pleasure of delivering learning events for Bradford Council in recent years, which looked at the challenging issues around Safeguarding, of both adults and young people. It has been quite a learning experience for us, and one that has helped us create a range of learning experiences for members on this topic.

One of the key features of our events was that they were developed directly with staff from within the Council. We also wanted to focus on enabling members to share and develop their practice, and facilitate communication directly with the experts within the Council. What resulted were a series of actor led scenarios, based upon realistic examples of when a Councillor is dealing with a member of the public on such an issue.

After each one was played out, we challenged the audience to share ideas and practice on what the Councillor should do next – who should they talk to? How should they deal with the member of the public? How could they signpost support? What was their role and responsibility in dealing with the situation?

This was a hugely successful approach as the quality of the conversations, the sharing of ideas between highly experienced and less experienced members, as well as input from the very Council staff who deal with safeguarding, created great learning outcomes. Yes, there is guidance out there for you on the facts about safeguarding, defining it. But what exactly do you say or do when a desperate parent has come to you because their son has been taken into care because of suspected abuse? How do you manage their expectations whilst providing some level of emotional support? How do you ensure you don't undermine an ongoing investigation whilst at the same time working hard for your constituent? These were the challenges that were discussed.

What can I share with you in this article? Well, based upon the learning outcomes of the events, and the content of an audio CD we have produced for members, I wanted to share a model with you – a simple five step plan which when used, encapsulates all of the best practice from members themselves.

So, let's take a situation, where a member of the public has come to you, and what they tell you is new to you. You have only their word to go on, and no background information. What should you do?

### **Rule Number 1: Be Open**

This is about being open minded. When hearing a difficult and often emotional story it would be very easy to make a series of assumptions or subtly apportion blame when in the conversation. You could, for example, however unrealistic, say 'yes, the home isn't doing him / her any good by the sounds of it' or 'they've obviously fallen in with the wrong crowd', or 'the home would never allow this behaviour'. All these are statements which are based upon the Councillor judging the situation from what they have heard. You don't have all the facts. Be open to alternative views. For example, perspectives from professionals in the case, information from children's services about what will often

be an ongoing process where the authorities are involved. In making such statements, which are in fact easily done, you risk creating the impression that you believe their perspective is correct, and that you will want to change the current situation in their favour. This might not be the case.

### **Rule Number 2: Fact Find**

At an initial conversation there will be a lot going on that you are unaware of. What more can you glean about the facts of the case? You may have received a whole series of personal views about the situation. What information can you get from them that will help you take the issue forward? Examples of key facts would be; names and details of key parties, a solid timeline of events, key agencies they know to be involved, the situation as it is now, the role of the person or people bringing it to your attention. In summary, use this opportunity to gather as much hard information as possible, removing yourself from opinion and arguments for a particular course of action. Build a picture for yourself that you can share with others.

### **Rule Number 3: Enable**

It is important to see your role as an enabler. In virtually all cases, there will be a process in place, agencies involved, and often a highly charged emotional element – if someone has come to you it is likely they believe that the situation is not being handled properly. In reality, the Council services and partners might be doing everything they can. There may well be important information you don't know about the situation, which may well be confidential. What you *can* do is empathise (not sympathise) with their concerns, and explain that you can enable them to get clarity on what is happening and being done. This way you aren't setting up unrealistic expectations but demonstrating that you take their concerns seriously and that you respect their need to get feedback and feel involved. See yourself as the 'empathetic enabler', as opposed to a supporter.

### **Rule Number 4: Act**

Whenever there is a potential risk to a person it is imperative that you take action. So what is appropriate? As you may know, as soon as you are emotionally involved in a situation, it is very easy to get passionate about it – feel that you need to dive in and solve it. In most cases, possibly the worst thing would be to go charging in – speaking to family, friends, essentially having direct contact with those involved. This may well undermine the work already going on by Council services. In practically every case, the best action to take is to explain what you have learnt to;

- The Director of Children's / Adult Services;
- The Safeguarding Board Manager; or
- an appropriate safeguarding or children's services professional

The exception is where you feel that there is such an immediate risk of abuse, neglect, or injury that the police must be notified immediately to make an intervention. By explaining to the people you are talking to the actions you *will* take, you can assure them that their concerns are being dealt with appropriately.

### **Rule Number 5: Assurance**

There are two parts to this rule. Firstly, to quality assure the process – that something is being done, through the right people. The second is to re-assure – in this case coming back to the member of the public to explain what action has been taken and what further involvement would be appropriate for them to have.

As a Councillor, you have a duty to scrutinise, and quality assure the services of the Council, and ensure that everything is being done to improve the life chances of the person at risk. This way, you can also guarantee that you can give clear feedback about the progression of the case, or ensure they can access the correct services to get those answers.

So, to summarise the golden rules;

1. Be Open
2. Fact find
3. Enable
4. Act
5. Assurance

Whilst this is a brief introduction on how to deal with a safeguarding issue, we continue to develop more live events for members as well as resources online and on CD. So watch this space for further opportunities to share and develop your practice.

*Chris Simes  
Managing Director  
Collingwood Learning Solutions Ltd.*

*T: 01484 681025  
M: 07976 730306  
E: [chris@collingwoodlearning.com](mailto:chris@collingwoodlearning.com)  
W: [www.collingwoodlearning.com/](http://www.collingwoodlearning.com/)*

*Bridge Mills, Huddersfield Road, Holmfirth. West Yorkshire. HD9 3TW*

## **About Collingwood**

At Collingwood we use theatre and other interactive methods to create behavioural change. We believe that whilst skills and knowledge are crucial components of a training or education project, it's the 'how' of learning that is vital to success. We transform the mindsets of people to being open to new ideas and behaviours, giving them the ability to learn effectively and implement change.

Whether working with young people or adults, we work with you to design learning projects which are fun, interactive and powerful, whilst ensuring they deliver hard learning outcomes and are measurable over time.

- Education. Theatre-in-education programmes which inspire young people on a range of careers and PSHE related topics
- Training. Interactive theatre based training, which simulates real life interactions allowing delegates to make practical and realistic changes in their working lives
- Consultancy. A range of services which enable your team or organisation to grow and thrive

Every project we have delivered is a partnership between us and our clients. We love to really get to know you and work in close partnership so that we create something just right. This means we never stop learning ourselves.