# Young people who have been maltreated - different needs: different responses?

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## Abstract

*The maltreatment experiences and needs of young people (aged 11-17) are often very different to those of younger children. As children get older, they become increasingly vulnerable to a broader range of risks. In comparison to younger children, young people are more likely to experience maltreatment outside the home, and are more likely to become involved in a range of risk-taking behaviours, which may make them more vulnerable. Additionally, it can be more challenging for social workers to engage young people and their parents in the child protection process. This article draws on the findings of a two and a half year study that examined the process of referral of young people to Children's Social Care Services in England and initial responses once young people have been referred. Through qualitative interviews with social workers, the paper considers frontline social work responses to young people across four local authority areas. The findings highlight the broad and complex range of issues that young people present and document the variation in local responses to this age group. The research highlights the need for a review of the responses that are being used, and consideration of which approach works best for young people.*

## Background

The maltreatment of young people is an issue of substantial concern and affects many thousands in the UK alone. Official statistics for England show that 10,000 young people aged 10 to 15 and 780 young people aged 16 or over were the subject of a child protection plan on 31st March 2010 (Department for Education, 2010) and prevalence figures show the actual numbers in the general population are much higher. A recent UK

study by Radford *et al* (2011) suggests that maltreatment may be higher amongst over 11s than under 11s. Their study found that 6% of 11-17 year olds reported experiencing maltreatment by parents or guardians in the past year whilst only 2.5% was reported for under 11s (it should be noted that some of this variation may be due to parents/guardians reporting rates for under 11s). As may be expected, figures for maltreatment by other adults outside the home in the past year were higher for 11-17s (3.1%) compared to under 11s (1.2%). Their research shows that experiences of maltreatment and other forms of victimisation accumulated with age, with teenagers reporting more maltreatment, physical violence and sexual abuse than younger children.

Recent research on serious case reviews in England (that examine the death or serious injury of a child where abuse or neglect is known or suspected) for the period between April 2007 - March 2009 has highlighted that a quarter of the reviews were about older young people who are likely to pose a risk to themselves and/or others (Brandon *et al*, 2009, Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills 2011). Whilst it has often been assumed that maltreatment of younger children is most likely to lead to poor outcomes, a longitudinal study in the US has concluded that the effects of maltreatment experienced during adolescence only, or throughout childhood and adolescence, has stronger and more pervasive effects on later adjustment than maltreatment experienced *only* at a younger age, (Thornberry *et al* 2001).

A recent Ofsted evaluation of Serious Case Reviews in England (from April 2007 to March 2011) highlights the complexity and range of risks for the over 14 year old age group (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills 2011). The research by Brandon *et al* (2009) also highlights that the needs and maltreatment experiences of young people aged 11-17 are often different and more complex than those of younger children. As children get older they become more mobile, come into contact with a wider social network and face a whole range of different social and environmental risks outside the family to younger children (Rees *et al*, 2010). Earlier maltreatment experiences and/or poor experiences of parenting during childhood and adolescence have often been shown to be linked to increased vulnerability and later risk taking behaviours,

such as running away, sexual exploitation, and substance misuse (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999; Bancroft *et al*, 2004; Rees and Lee, 2005; Smith *et al*, 2005; Thrane *et al*, 2006; Coy, 2009; Peled and Cohavi, 2009). Young people are also more likely to experience changes in family structure and this may play a part in terms of increased stress within families. Research on running away in the UK (Safe on the Streets Research Team, 1999) has highlighted the way in which family dynamics in reconstituted families may have a particular impact on young people as they grow older, sometimes leading to them being forced to leave home.  Factors such as parental substance misuse and mental ill-health may also have different impacts on young people as they grow older, with young people taking on more caring responsibilities as their own capacities develop.

Despite young people's needs and experiences often being different to those of younger children, research about maltreatment and the child protection system in England has tended not to distinguish between ages of those children who experience it (Stein *et al*, 2009). In 1999, Rees and Stein (1999) undertook a literature review on abuse of adolescents and found very little research on child protection issues with a specific focus on older young people in the UK context, and an updated review showed that this picture remained largely unchanged (see Rees *et al*, 2010).

There is a small body of literature which considers social work decision making at the point of referral to Children's Social Care Services in the UK (Ayre 1998; Spratt 2000; Cleaver and Walker 2004; Platt 2006). However, with the exception of Cleaver and Walker (2004) none of the available literature has identified the age of the child as a factor in decision making around significant harm or child protection thresholds. Cleaver and Walker's (2004) study of assessment processes in a sample of 24 local authorities found that the likelihood of proceeding through the various stages of the assessment process was approximately equal for referrals of children and young people in the 5 to 9 and 10 to 14 age groups.  However, referrals of young people aged 15 and over were much less likely to relate to child protection responses and were less likely to proceed through the assessment process. Baginsky's (2007) research examined schools

experiences of making referrals to Children's Social Care Services for child protection concerns and found that in all three areas studied there were adolescents who were potentially at significant risk, but whom schools believed had not received an adequate response from Children's Social Care Services.

Engaging young people in the child protection process can be challenging and previous research has highlighted the "essentially child-unfriendly nature" (Saunders and Mace 2006: 89) of the process and that children and young people are often marginalised within it (Saunders and Mace, 2006). Working effectively with young people who are at risk of significant harm can be a complex task for professionals, who need to balance the rights of the child and their wishes regarding their care, with the need to ensure their protection (Pearce, 2006; Saunders and Mace, 2006). Some young people may have experienced years of abuse or neglect and may be highly resistant and understandably fearful of involvement with Children's Social Care Services. The review by Brandon *et al* (2009) highlights the difficulty for social workers of engaging with young people, often following on from negative experiences of care. Various commentators have highlighted that non-engagement of young people may be their way of actively taking some control of a situation in which their ability to assert choice is limited (Pearce 2006; McLeod, 2007; Coy, 2009).

**The practice context**

Our study was undertaken at a time of ongoing changes of practice within social care across England and Wales. From 2006 the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) was introduced for practitioners from a range of backgrounds to gather and assess information in relation to a child's needs in development, parenting, and the family environment. The CAF process is designed so practitioners can identify a child's or young person's needs early, assess those needs holistically, deliver coordinated services and review progress. The CAF process is led by a lead professional who is known to the child or young person. A Team Around the Child (TAC) is a multi-disciplinary team of practitioners who come together on a case-by-case basis to implement support to a child, young person or family. The CAF and TAC are designed to be used to assist early

intervention, and were not designed to replace child protection services. However the CAF and TAC may be used in some cases in which maltreatment has been perpetrated, particularly if maltreatment is part of a broader picture of concerns. As well as these forms of assessment and support, children may also be assessed by Children's Services as a 'Child In Need' using the 'Assessment Framework' and may receive support services as a result. There is currently little available evidence regarding how successful the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), Child in Need (CIN) or Team Around the Child (TAC) processes are in meeting the needs of children, young people and families, or on the outcomes of these safeguarding processes and the emerging evidence has drawn mixed conclusions (Samuels *et al* 2009).

## The policy context

Policy developments in child protection in England have been shaped by many influences including Inquiries into the deaths of individual children, public outrage, media scrutiny, the opinions of politicians, experts and senior staff, and research evidence (see Frost and Parton, 2009, for an overview). Our study was undertaken from 2007- 2010 and spanned the period in which the circumstances surrounding Baby Peter's death came into the public arena, the subsequent review by Lord Laming of the progress being made across the country to implement effective arrangements for safeguarding children and the plethora of policy related reports and guidance that followed (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2009; Laming, 2009; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010; HM Government, 2010). The timing of our research with the Baby Peter case meant that Children's Services Departments were put under enormous strain with a surge in the number of cases being referred and having child protection plans (Department for Education, 2010), increasing the pressure on an already overstretched system.

Whilst the Children Act, 1989 and the Children Act, 2004 require that children's views are listened to and the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child states that children capable of forming their own views must be given the right to express them in all matters affecting them (Article 12), the extent to which their voices are routinely heard in child

protection practice has been questioned (McLeod, 2007). This has been recognised in the recent Munro review of child protection (Munro, 2010; 2011a; 2011b) which importantly recommend placing the child at the centre of child protection practice and highlight the importance of minimising bureaucratic processes, in order to free up time for social workers to develop effective relationships with children and young people and their families.

## Methodology

Findings presented in this paper are from a larger research study (Rees *et al*, 2010) which aimed to promote improved safeguarding responses for young people aged 11-17. The broader study explored access to, and initial responses of services for young people with potential maltreatment issues. The project consisted of four linked components: a comprehensive international literature review; a study of policy and guidance; a comparative study of risk assessment and decision-making about maltreatment amongst professionals in Children's Social Care Services and potential referring agencies; and a study of practice in Children's Social Care Services. In this paper we will be drawing largely upon data collected in the study of practice, which was undertaken by the authors whilst employed by the NSPCC.

The practice study took place across four local authorities and involved a mixed methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data collection. In this article we will focus on the qualitative data that was collected and in particular we will present findings from qualitative interviews with twenty-two social workers. All the social workers who were interviewed worked on duty and assessment teams and worked across four different local authority areas, with 7 working in a Shire authority, 6 working in a Unitary authority, 5 working in a Metropolitan authority, and 4 in a Greater London authority. Social workers who participated had a range of social care experience, ranging from newly qualified social workers to those with more than twenty years of social work experience.

Social workers were asked about their experiences of receiving referrals of the 11-17 year olds, decision making with regards to this age group and their opinions on current practice with regards to engaging and safeguarding young people. Social workers were provided with information about the project prior to the telephone interview and verbal consent to be interviewed was recorded at the beginning of each interview. In the course of the interviews some practitioners did give case examples but no identifying features were asked for or given, and confidentiality of the young people and families concerned was maintained throughout.

The research project received approval from the Research Group of the Association of Directors of Children's Services; University of York ethics committee and through research governance frameworks of participating local authorities where required. The data that was collected was anonymised and stored securely. The interviews were all confidential, although it was explained that quotes from interviews may be used, but would not contain any identifying information

The interview transcripts were analysed using NVivo (QSR International PTY Ltd. Victoria, Australia). Common and unique themes were identified among the 22 social workers responses to questions about decision making and the age of the child. Quotes used in this article represent examples of the broad common themes identified through the analysis. The research is qualitative in nature and presents the opinions of 22 social workers working across four different local authorities. In this respect, there are likely to be themes identified in our analysis which reflect the experiences of other social workers and local authorities, but also there may be themes presented in this article that do not.

As the first research to specifically focus upon the issue of the maltreatment of young people in the UK and safeguarding responses to 11-17 year olds, the broader research project was essentially exploratory in nature and, at times, the research findings raise as many questions as they are able to answer. The research focused upon decision making at the point of referral to statutory services in England and the significance of the age of the child upon decision making. In the light of the Safeguarding agenda, which arose from

Lord Laming's Review of Child Protection in 2000 and which has dominated social care arrangements from this date, this focus may appear narrow given the wider range of processes now used to safeguard children and young people. Indeed, one of the key findings from our interviews with social workers was that a variety of safeguarding approaches are being used by different local authorities to meet the needs of the 11-17 year age group, such as the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), Team Around the Child (TAC) and Child in Need (CIN) procedures. Unfortunately, our focus upon decision making at the point of referral means that we were unable to assess the relative merits of these alternative approaches for the 11-17 year old age group.

## Responses of Children's Social Care Services to young people

Through our interviews with social workers we were able to explore three key areas: decision-making when referrals of young people are received; the appropriateness of child protection to meet young people's needs; and the alternative actions social workers take when a referral is not to be dealt with through the child protection route.

### *Decision-making when referrals of young people are received*

Many of the social workers we interviewed reported that age was a factor in making decisions about what action should be taken as a result of a referral. This was echoed by professionals who made referrals of young people, many of whom believed that securing a child protection response became incrementally more difficult as a young person reached the age of fourteen or fifteen (see Rees *et al*, 2010 for further information about professional's views). Whilst some social workers recognised that age was not always linked to ability, others linked age to vulnerability and/or resilience factors, believing that the older the child the less vulnerable and more 'resilient' they were. Many social workers also drew a further distinction between young people aged 11 to 14 and those aged 15 and over. A number of social workers thought that young people were able to disclose abuse more easily than younger children and that they were less vulnerable because they were able to leave an abusive situation of their own accord.

*Younger children are more susceptible and can't voice. The younger children can't voice what's happening, so I'm more concerned with a baby versus a 16 year old…I'm not more concerned, but you know the concern is there because that child can't speak for themselves.*

**Social Worker**

A number of social workers described age as having an effect on the way in which they would prioritise responses to referrals and said it could affect the urgency of a response.

*We make attempts to see the family if they've got a referral for an under 5, we go out and see that family within 24 hours, I would certainly try to see the family within 24 hours. Now, it is quite interesting because the research tells us that most our serious case reviews are not the under 5's but the 11- to 17-year-olds.*

**Social worker**

The ability of social workers on Duty and Assessment teams to respond to young people and the need to prioritise cases was linked by practitioners to resource issues such as a lack of social work staff, poor social work retention rates alongside a large volume of referrals. In addition, social workers were dealing with time consuming system processes (as recently documented by Munro (2010; 2011a; 2011b) in her recent review of child protection) which meant they often spent a considerable time undertaking paperwork and this limited their ability to do as much direct work with young people and families as they would have liked. Social workers described timescales which were often too short to undertake complex assessments or build relationships with young people and excessive audit requirements. This often meant that practitioners knew they were unable to respond as they might have liked and led to priorities having to be set in terms of response. Resource issues and system constraints were also seen to be affecting young people because practitioners had less time to build effective relationships and there were fewer services available to meet their needs (see also Jobe and Gorin, forthcoming 2012).

**Interviewer**: *Ok, what do you see as the biggest challenges you face in terms of providing protective services for older children?*

**Social worker:** *Prioritising them. That's got to be it. You know, we are an understaffed team with, you know, worked to the hilt, staff here don't just don't have a second in the day at all to take a breather and we can't, we can't rush out to a sixteen year old who's perhaps sofa-surfing and perhaps experimenting with drugs and getting into crime, you know that's a big worry, but we can't prioritise that when we're working with 0 to 5 year olds in, you know, some pretty dire situations.*

***Appropriateness of child protection system to meet the needs of young people***
Views about the use of child protection processes with young people were varied amongst the social workers interviewed, and experiences, processes and services in individual authorities are all likely to influence perspectives. Whilst many practitioners said that child protection processes would be the way they would deal with maltreatment of a young person (especially those fourteen and under) they often felt there were circumstances in which it would not necessarily be the most appropriate way to meet young people's needs. There were a number of reasons for this. Firstly as discussed earlier, young people's previous experiences are often complex. Social workers observed that whilst young people may be referred for maltreatment issues, many young people were also referred for risk taking behaviours and were often considered to be a risk to themselves. Another reason given by practitioners for not pursuing a child protection response for this age group was that it was considered to be less appropriate when the risk of maltreatment was not within the immediate family as is more frequently the case with older children (see Radford *et al* 2011).

The child protection process was also seen as not always providing social workers with the most appropriate tools to work with and engage young people and their families. A number of social workers identified 11-17-year-olds as a difficult age group to work with and engage in the child protection process as it was felt that the processes involved often acted to alienate young people. Child protection conferences in particular were often

believed to fail to engage young people, with many young people not attending and if they did attend, their experiences being negative.

**Interviewer***: Do you see child protection as always the most appropriate response for the eleven to seventeen year-old age group.*
**Social worker***: No, absolutely not…Because you know, teenagers will very rarely attend their own meetings, it's too intimidating for them. I mean it's horrendous to sit with your teacher and your family together in a room, discussing your misdemeanors, it's not something teenagers are really interested in.*

Some social workers also felt that child protection processes focused too much on controlling parents to the detriment of supporting young people and/or incorporating their views:

*I think child protection tends to be about putting controls around parents, whereas when youngsters at that sort of age they've got much more of a personal input to situations that need to be reflected.*
**Social worker**

This was supported by findings in our interviews with young people who said they wanted more autonomy and control over what happens to them (see Rees *et al*, 2010 and Jobe and Gorin, forthcoming 2012).

Some social workers also highlighted that child protection plans may not work with parents of older children as they tend to be less motivated to keep young people in the family home. Consequently, many felt that it was more appropriate to work directly with young people, especially those who were 16 years old and over, to prepare them for independent living. In cases in which young people lacked family support this approach was deemed to better meet young person's needs.

*Alternative responses to young people who have been maltreated*

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Social work practice in the four participating local authorities differed in terms of the way they were working with young people. Some authorities were more likely to use child protection processes with young people than others and the types of alternative responses that were being used also varied within and between authorities. Alternative ways in which Children's Social Care Services were responding to the needs of young people included utilising multi agency early intervention models such as the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) and use of the 'Child in Need' route (CIN) (discussed earlier). Some local authorities were also using multi-agency risk assessment tools when assessing risks of maltreatment to young people.

It was believed by many social workers that multi-agency early intervention models, such as the CAF and CIN, offered a better model than child protection to engage young people as these approaches were thought to give young people more autonomy, input and control over proceedings. Another advantage was the partnership working involved so that young people's existing relationships with professionals could be maintained. Elsewhere in our study, the development of a relationship with one key professional was reported by young people in our interviews as being crucial as it allows for continuity and consistency for the young person and the family (Jobe and Gorin, forthcoming 2012).

For social workers the benefit of using CIN processes and the CAF was in being able to form a Team Around the Child (TAC). This was considered to be a useful way of working with young people as professionals can be included who were known to and trusted by the young person. In addition, as explored earlier in this article, social workers often felt that the risks to young people were different compared to younger children and the alternative approaches to safeguarding were believed to be more appropriate as young people's reason for referral did not always "fit" current definitions of child protection or understandings of significant harm.

There was a wide variation across our four local authorities in terms of use and experience of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). In one local authority the CAF was not being used and in another, social workers felt it was working well. The

CAF was cited by many social workers as offering a model of good practice for working with young people and it was generally viewed as a positive tool by professionals outside Children's Social Care Services, if it was used appropriately to support young people. In some authorities it was felt that this was not the case and instead it was being used to meet the needs of young people who should receive child protection services, but who were not reaching the high thresholds.

Implementation of the CAF was seen to pose a number of challenges, most significantly a shift in responsibility for some of the supportive safeguarding work away from social workers and on to other key professionals. Some social workers felt that the CAF was not being taken up by professionals and believed that there was confusion on the part of other professionals about whose responsibility safeguarding was.

Social workers also felt that there was confusion about the thresholds for child protection and the use of the CAF. This social worker said:

*There needs to be more clarity with regards to what constitutes a CAF referral and a referral to ourselves, and I don't honestly think other professionals are completely clear, you know. It's nothing to do with …you know, it's no fault of anyone, I just don't think maybe they're completely clear at the moment.*
**Social worker**

Many of the social workers interviewed believed that the Child in Need process (CIN) often offered a more constructive way of working with the older age group as this approach takes account of their needs and capabilities, and many believed CIN to be a less alienating process for young people and their families. Again practices differed, but in some local authorities teenagers were more likely to go down a Child in Need route initially.

*[Child Protection] doesn't always engage people... I don't think it's always the answer and I do think to be honest, child in need is proving very much to confirm and support*

*this, that a protection plan isn't always the answer and I think it's engagement, it's having an appropriate plan, it's being able to work with the family it's being able to engage all the agencies that impinge on that families life..... that can lead to a success, as much and sometimes if not more than a protection plan, which can alienate people rather than engage them.*
**Social worker**

In another local authority multi-agency risk assessment was being developed as an alternative way of working with young people. These processes were often believed to provide more appropriate tools for working with many 11-17 year olds. A number of social workers from one of the authorities discussed using risk management as an effective alternative way of working with the older age group:

*I mean we have now looked at using risk management for adolescents in many instances rather than child protection ... and may well be much more appropriate. It's very similar to a child protection conference and still chaired by a safeguarding manager, or independent reviewing officer, and it's still multi-agency, and still puts together a plan ... it's just that it isn't a child protection plan, it's a multi-agency plan to manage the risk.*
**Social worker**

Some social workers believed that the core assessment focus on needs as opposed to risk made it less appropriate for young people. Social workers felt it was important to establish what the risks to young people were as well as establishing needs and that this was specific to the older age group.

## Discussion

In considering the data we have explored, it is important to remember that practice between and within local authorities is hugely variable and what has been presented is a snapshot of the views of practitioners in four local authorities. However it raises questions about whether the child protection system in its current form, is the best way to

meet the needs of older young people or whether the different needs of young people do demand a different response?

Our research showed the maltreatment experiences and the needs of young people were often distinct from those of younger children in that they were more likely to include a wider range of issues such as violence, self harming behaviour and substance misuse (Rees *et al*, 2010). In addition, our research, and that of others (Radford et al 2011), suggests that maltreatment outside the home is also more prevalent amongst the older age group, requiring a different response to that typically provided by child protection processes which tend to be geared towards maltreatment in the home. Our broader research (Rees *et al*, 2010) also found that young people wanted more control, involvement and autonomy from the child protection process and again this makes their needs distinct from those of younger children.

All of the social workers we spoke to were concerned about the protection needs of young people and wanted to provide the best possible service. However, many felt that Children's Services was constrained by lack of money, resources and bureaucratic systems, and that these issues limited the ability of social workers working at the front door of Children's Social Care Services to engage with young people as they would like.

Our findings highlight that young people were likely to be seen as more resilient than younger children and this influenced practitioners thinking when making decisions about prioritising referrals. The picture of course is far more complex than professionals simply acting or not, on the age of a child referred but as social workers said, cases have to prioritised using some criteria, and when resources are sparse this is likely to impact disproportionately on the older age group. Existing evidence does not support the view that young people are more resilient or that they are necessarily more able to communicate about maltreatment, as their increased awareness of the impact of disclosure raises a different range of barriers to young people (see Jobe and Gorin, Forthcoming 2012, for more detail).

The interviews with social workers demonstrate that in practice many young people are dealt with via another route other than child protection. Whilst our interviewees responses were varied, many were critical of the current child protection system's ability to meet the need of young people, especially those aged fourteen and upwards. There are differing views about whether the child protection system should be used for maltreated young people, with much of the criticism centering around the fit of the current system to respond to the differing maltreatment experiences young people have, the complex interplay of risk factors for young people and the inability of the system to engage with the very people it is there to protect.

Social workers felt that the child protection system tends to take control away from young people and can make young people feel they are unable to influence or be involved in decisions affecting their own lives. In particular, social workers believed that child protection conferences and reviews seemed to alienate young people and felt that the balance fell too strongly on controlling parents, rather than supporting young people. Saunders and Mace (2006) argue for the need to informalise the child protection system so that parents and children are able to participate within it more easily and feel less intimidated.  Research by Woolfson *et al*, 2010, Buckley *et al*, 2011 and Cossar *et al*, 2011 highlights the low levels of participation of children and young people in child protection processes and the often difficult experience of those who do participate, indicating an urgent need for system change. Whilst practice is variable in authorities in terms of child protection conferences and some authorities are introducing less formal approaches (see Davenport *et al*, 2010) it seems there is a need for more widespread change and sharing of good practice that does exist.

Across the four participating local authorities, social workers often believed that alternative Safeguarding responses, such as the CAF and CIN, were more appropriate to meet the needs of young people.  These multi-agency approaches in various different forms were considered preferable because they allow more flexibility to work alongside young people and their families, they allow a lead professional with whom a young

person already has a trusting relationship to be identified and provide more autonomy to young people.

However, there is currently limited evidence on the outcomes of multi-agency working through the CAF, CIN and TAC and the evidence which does consider outcomes for children and families is mixed (Samuels *et al* 2009). The use of a multi-agency approach is supported by Pearce (2006) who argues that the child protection process should be used as part of a multi-agency approach to address the diverse needs many young people present. There is evidence from young people to suggest that a multi-agency approach is likely to be more acceptable to young people, especially as it gives the opportunity to allow for continuity of workers who are known and trusted by young people (Rees *et al,* 2010, Jobe and Gorin, forthcoming 2012). What children and young people want from the child protection system is clear and has been echoed throughout our and other direct research with children and young people. They value the development of a consistent relationship with one trusted professional, they want to be fully informed about what is happening to them and their families, they want to be listened to and they want their views to be taken into account (Butler and Williamson, 1994; Saunders and Mace, 2006; McLeod, 2007; Willow, 2009; McLeod, 2010; Jobe and Gorin, Forthcoming 2012).

## Conclusion

This research highlights that as young people become older they face a range of different risks; they have a range of different capabilities to younger children and as a consequence have different needs to those of younger children, particularly in relation to developing their own confidence and agency in decisions that affect their lives.

During the fieldwork and subsequent dissemination of the findings to local authorities it has been clear that how to formulate the most effective response to referrals of young people who may be experiencing maltreatment is a key area of concern and one many local authorities are currently grappling with. Whilst this research has not provided the answers, it has raised many questions about the appropriateness of the current system to meet the needs of young people, especially those aged 14 and over.

Some local authorities are finding and developing new ways to work with young people, but practice development is variable and there is little in the way of evaluated evidence on which approach works best for young people and their families. Our research demonstrates that social care professionals largely thought that the child protection route was not necessarily the most effective way to meet the needs of young people. This does not mean that young people were not receiving a service, but the way in which needs were being met was very diverse. The current drive towards the development of localism suggests that it is increasingly important that local authorities share good practice about the way in which the system is meeting needs and how future approaches may be able to improve protection and engage better with young people.

The extent to which the recommendations of the Munro Review (2010, 2011a; 2011b) will be put into practice and the impact these may have on young people within the child protection system is still unclear at the time of writing. However we suggest there needs to be a review of practice with young people who are maltreated, an evaluation of responses that are being used and an assimilation of best practice evidence that can help inform all local authorities. In particular there is a need to assess the outcomes of different responses for a range of young people and ascertain *their* views about which process is best suited to meet their needs.

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