

Public attitudes to safeguarding children



Background

This paper presents findings from a survey of a representative sample of over 2,000 adults in the UK about attitudes to safeguarding children. The survey explored the views of the public about levels of risk to children in relation to six hypothetical scenarios of possible abuse or neglect.

The issue of safeguarding children and young people has been a matter of considerable public debate over the last two years in the UK. The case of Baby P in 2008 was the latest in a series of cases which have triggered public concern about how best to protect children from abuse and neglect. While this case involved a very young child, recent research on Serious Case Reviews¹ has shown that over a fifth of such reviews involve young people of secondary school age.

The Children's Society is currently undertaking a major research project on safeguarding young people, in partnership with NSPCC and the University of York, funded by the Lottery. The study explores

the perceptions of young people, and professionals working with them, on current child protection responses for young people aged 11 to 17. The final report of this research will be published later in July.

To complement this work, The Children's Society decided to commission a survey of the general public regarding attitudes to safeguarding issues and how these vary with children's age. Relatively little recent research has been done in the UK on public attitudes to these issues. Studies in other countries have shown that there are diverse views about definitions and impacts of different types of abuse and neglect.

About the research

The survey was administered face to face by GfK NOP in April 2010 to a sample of 2,047 people aged over 18 in England, Scotland and Wales. The survey participants were asked to assess the risk of harm, either physical or emotional, to children and young people in six scenarios. Risk was rated on a nine point scale where 1 represented no risk at all and 9 represented a lot of risk and all percentages in this report exclude people who replied 'don't know'². The age and gender of the child or young person in each scenario was randomly varied to make it possible to explore how attitudes differed according to these characteristics.

The six scenarios are shown in Table 1 which also shows the shorthand title of the scenario used in this paper (these short titles were not presented to respondents).

Scenario	Referred to in this paper as...
A parent regularly allows their son/daughter aged 6-15, to stay out in the local area after nine o'clock during the summer months, without knowing their whereabouts.	Supervision
A parent does not seek dental care for their son/daughter aged 6-15, when they complain of persistent toothache.	Medical needs
A parent does not show any concern or care for their son/daughter aged 6-15, who is distressed because of falling out with their friends at school.	Emotional needs
A parent regularly calls their son/daughter aged 6-15, stupid in front of their friends.	Ridiculing
For no apparent reason, a parent never allows his/her son/daughter aged 6-15, to see their friends outside of school.	Isolating
As a standard punishment, a parent slaps their son/daughter aged 6-15, on the legs with an open hand.	Physical punishment

Table 1: The six scenarios

1. These are reviews which are conducted by local authorities in cases where a child or young person dies or is seriously harmed.

2. Response rates to the questions were good with 'don't know' responses being in the 3% to 6% range which is acceptable. All results are presented for a weighted sample.

General patterns

The overall risk ratings for each scenario are shown in Figure 1. In this and other charts, people's responses have been grouped into three categories where 1 to 3 represents low risk, 4 to 6 represents medium risk and 7 to 9 represents high risk.

It can be seen that the two scenarios which were perceived to be the highest risk related to supervision and medical needs. Over three quarters of respondents rated these as a risk of 7 or higher on the 1 to 9 scale. Very few (around 4%) of respondents rated them as low risk.

At the other end of the spectrum³ was the scenario involving physical punishment. Here there was a very even split with around a third of respondents rating the scenario as high, medium or low risk.

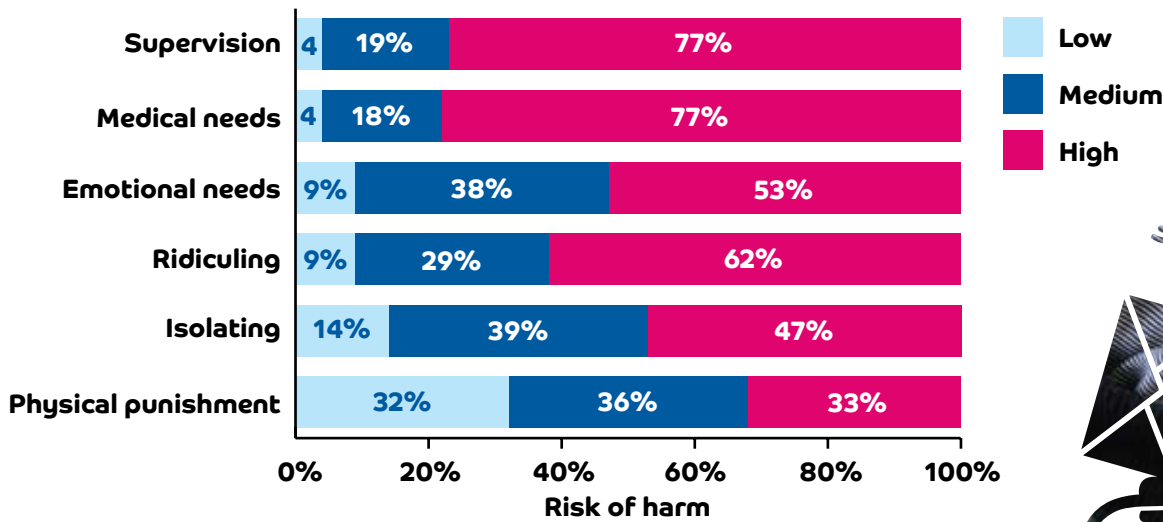


Figure 1: Risk ratings for each scenario

We can also look at the proportion of respondents who gave each scenario a very high score in Figure 2:

- Half of respondents rated the supervision scenario as 9 out of 9 – a lot of risk
- Only one in seven respondents rated the physical punishment scenario as 9 out of 9.

At the other end of the ratings scale, 16% of respondents rated the physical punishment scenario as no risk at all. The proportion of respondents rating each of the other five scenarios as no risk at all was around or below 5%.

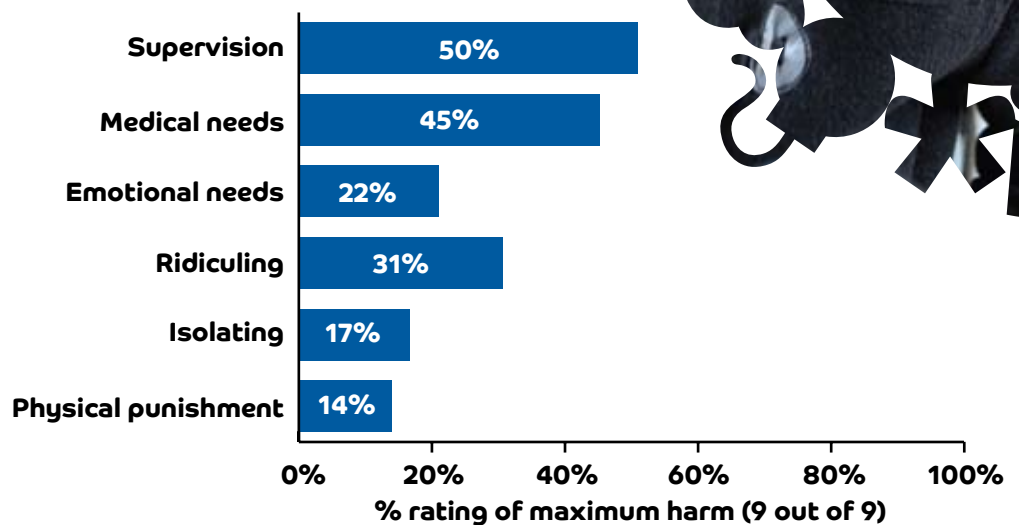


Figure 2: Percentage of respondents rating each scenario as a lot of risk

3. Note that we can't take these statistics as an indication of the perceptions of risk of the various forms of maltreatment. This is because we only have one scenario for each form – the scenarios themselves may vary in severity – so the physical punishment scenario may be relatively mild.



Variations by age and gender of young person

We were interested in exploring how people's perceptions of risk might vary according to the age and gender of the young person in the scenario, both of which were varied from one respondent to another.

The gender of the young person seemed to make very little difference to people's ratings of risk. The only scenario where the difference was statistically significant was the supervision scenario relating to young people being out in the local area after 9pm without parents knowing their whereabouts. Males were seen as being at somewhat lower risk of harm in this scenario than females.

In terms of the link between the age of the young person and the risk score, the most significant findings were that:

- For supervision, young people were **less** likely to be seen as at risk as they got older
- For physical punishment, young people were **more** likely to be seen as at risk as they got older.

For two of the other scenarios (medical needs and ridiculing) older young people were slightly less likely to be seen as at risk. For the remaining two scenarios (emotional needs and isolating) the age of the young person did not make any difference to ratings of risk.

The findings for supervision and physical punishment are illustrated in Figure 4 and Figure 5. In these two charts young people are divided into two groups roughly equating to primary school (6 to 10 years of age) and secondary school (11 to 15 years of age) ages.

Figure 4 shows that for the supervision scenario, just under three-quarters (74%) of secondary school aged children are seen as being at high risk compared to four-fifths (80%) of primary school aged children.

For this scenario, where the child was aged under 10, well over half of all respondents gave the maximum rating of 9 for risk of harm. For young people aged 14 and 15, the proportion rating the scenario at this level was below 40%.

Figure 5 shows that a greater proportion (36%) of secondary school aged children are rated as being at high risk of harm in relation to the physical punishment scenario, than primary school aged children (29%).

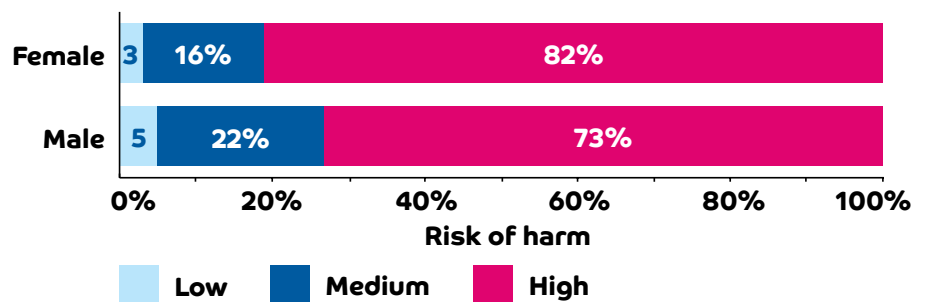


Figure 3: Supervision scenario – risk of gender of young person

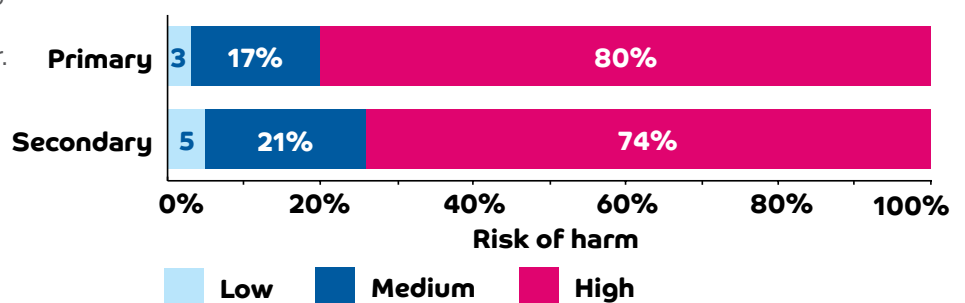


Figure 4: Supervision scenario – risk by age group

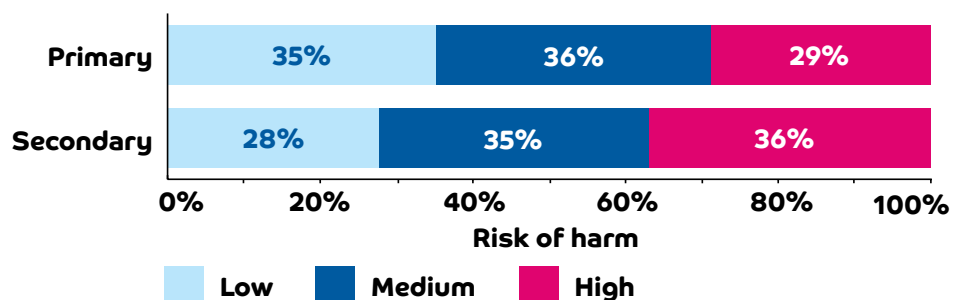


Figure 5: Physical punishment scenario – risk by age group

Variations by characteristics of respondent

Finally, we were also able to look at how different respondents rated the scenarios. We were able to consider respondents' age, gender and whether they lived in a household with children. We found some important differences here.

Gender

First, there were some significant differences in how females and males assessed the risk of the different scenarios. Males were likely to assess the following scenarios as less risky: supervision, medical needs, ridiculing, and physical punishment. The largest difference here was for supervision (see Figure 6).

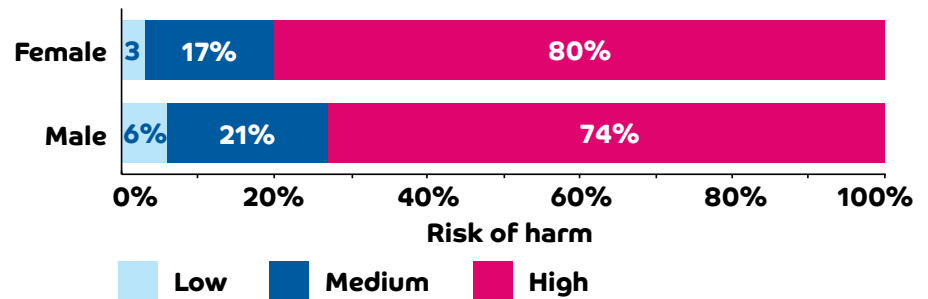


Figure 6: Supervision scenario – risk by gender of respondent



Age

There were some significant age patterns also.

- Older respondents were significantly more likely to assess the supervision scenario as risky, and the same applies to medical needs
- However, they were significantly less likely to assess the physical punishment scenario as risky.

A more detailed look at these age-related patterns provides some interesting findings. For supervision the key difference in opinion is between the youngest age group (18-24) and the other age groups (see Figure 7). Less than two-thirds (63%) of this youngest age group perceived this scenario as being high risk. The proportion across all other age groups fell in a small range from 76% to 81%.

On the other hand, for physical punishment the main difference relates to the oldest age group (65+) who appear much less likely to assess the scenario as risky than the other age groups who appeared to hold relatively similar views to one another (see Figure 8).

Over 30% of the oldest age group rated this scenario as no risk at all – around twice the average rating across all age groups.

Children in household

There was a general pattern that respondents who lived in a household with children assessed the scenarios as more risky than those who did not. However, only one of the differences was statistically significant. This was for physical punishment. As shown in Figure 9, people who lived in a household with children were much more likely to rate the physical punishment scenario as high risk of harm (41%) than people who did not live with children (29%).

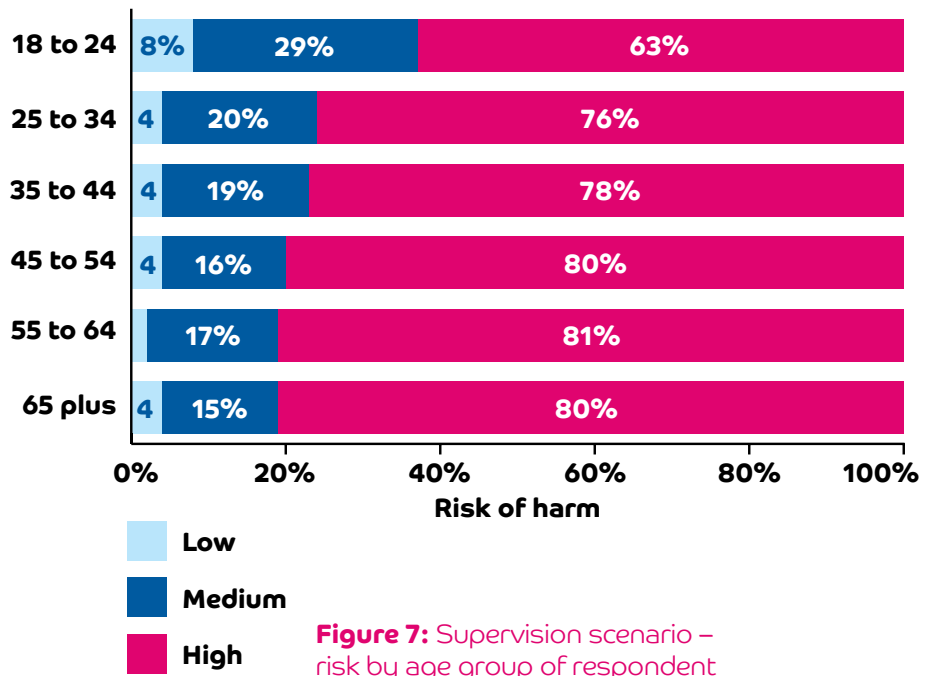


Figure 7: Supervision scenario – risk by age group of respondent

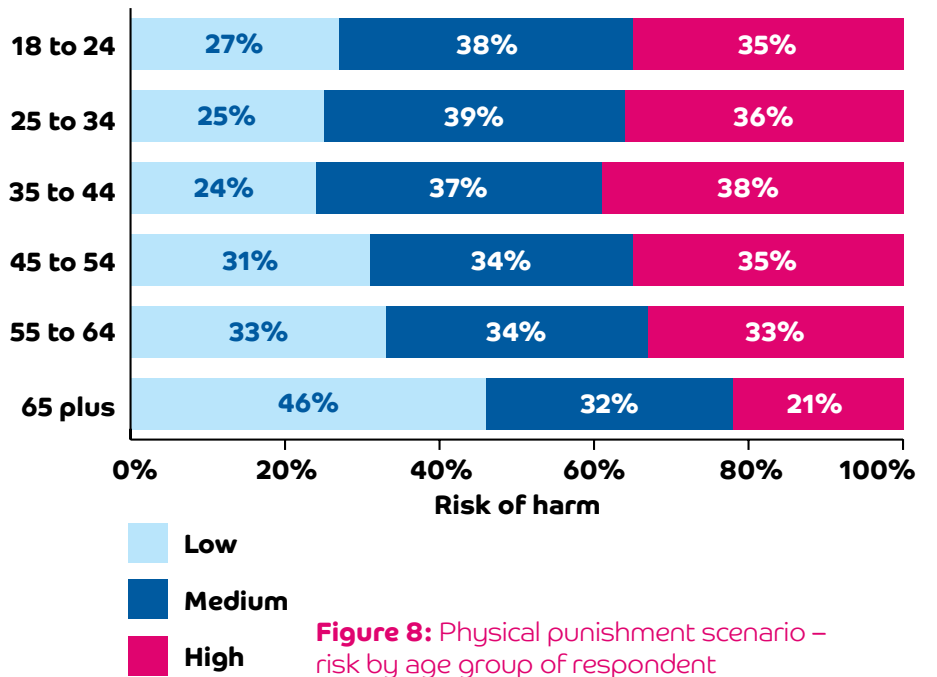


Figure 8: Physical punishment scenario – risk by age group of respondent

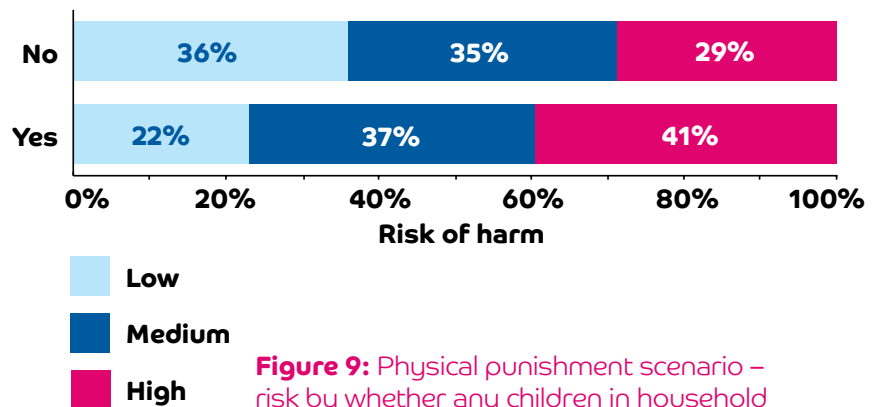


Figure 9: Physical punishment scenario – risk by whether any children in household

Discussion

This survey set out to learn more about assessments of risk to children and young people amongst the general population. This is a relatively under-researched area. Given the recent high levels of public debate about these issues, it is an important topic, and the findings of this study provide some interesting insights into current attitudes regarding safeguarding of children. The findings break down into three key themes.

First, the survey has highlighted areas of relative consensus and areas where there are more divergent opinions.

- The supervision scenario – about parental knowledge of children’s whereabouts when they are out of the house after 9pm in the evening – had a fairly high degree of consensus. Over three-quarters of respondents rated this scenario as high risk. The generally high risk rating of this scenario can be seen as an indication that knowledge and monitoring of children’s whereabouts is viewed as good parenting. It may also be an indication of people’s perceptions of risks to children and young people outside the home. It does raise questions about the relative balance of safety and freedom for young people as they mature.
- On the other hand, the physical punishment scenario – involving use of slapping as a standard punishment – was viewed as the least risky of the six scenarios presented and there was a wider spread of opinions on this topic with roughly even proportions of respondents viewing this scenario as high, medium and low risk. This finding points to a lack of consensus about the use of physical punishment which has also been highlighted by other recent research on this topic⁴.



Second, the findings show some important differences of opinion about safeguarding issues amongst different sub-groups of the population – in particular amongst different age groups.

- The youngest age group of adults (18-24) surveyed saw the supervision scenario as being less risky than did older age groups.
- The oldest age group of adults (65+) surveyed saw the physical punishment scenario as representing less risk of harm than did younger age groups.

These findings may point to generational shifts in opinions about acceptable parenting and risks to children.

Finally, the research sought to explore how children’s age affected perceptions of risk.

- The findings that people’s ratings of the risk of lack of parental supervision and attention to medical needs decreased as children got

older is not unexpected. These findings are likely to be linked to perceptions of increased competence and autonomy for older children. However, some of the other age-related findings here were unanticipated.

- People viewed physical punishment as representing a greater risk of harm as children grew older. The reasons for this finding are not clear and would need further exploration. It does not correspond with perceptions of increased ‘resilience’ of children as they grow older and may indicate a belief that physical punishment is more psychologically damaging to older children.
- For the remaining three scenarios, which related more to emotional aspects of care to children, there was very little difference in perceptions of risk to children of different ages. This seems to indicate a recognition of the potential impact of emotional abuse and neglect throughout childhood and youth.

4. Ipsos MORI (2007) *A Study into the Views of Parents on the Physical Punishment of Children*. London: DCSF; Bunting L, Webb MA & Healy J (2009) ‘In two minds? Parental attitudes towards physical punishment in the UK’ *Children & Society*, Online First.

The Children's Society view

The Children's Society absolutely believes that children and young people must be safeguarded from harm but that this must also be balanced with the freedom to be themselves and to take some risks.

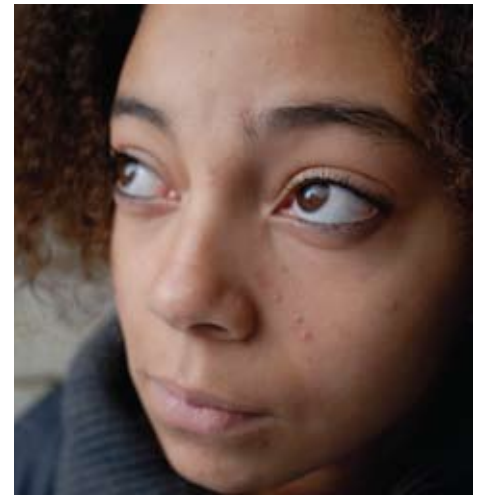
We also firmly believe that all children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence. To deliberately physically hurt a child in any way, for any purpose, is simply unacceptable. An important part of parenting is discipline and parents should be supported to use positive methods with their children. However, children should always be treated with dignity and respect and be given the same legal protection from assault that adults enjoy.

Children and young people must be listened to and taken seriously when they tell adults what they need. All children should have the freedom to develop friendships that are valued and taken seriously. Children want and need the freedom to make friends, to play and to have fun, on their own terms, without adult supervision.

While we know that there are risks to young people in the community, such as substance misuse and violence, we must recognise that the majority of children harmed each year, are harmed by someone they know. Young people must be safeguarded equally from all of these different risks and this includes making sure that they have the information they need to keep themselves safe.

Although we support the call for more local facilities and positive activities for young people, it is just as important that we learn to accept the presence of children and young people, *being* children and young people, in the public spaces and venues of our local communities. This would require a significant shift in public attitudes but if we want our children to respect other people, we must first show them how by treating them with the respect that they deserve.

This paper has been prepared by Gwyther Rees, Haridhan Goswami, Susie Ramsay and Marsha Lowe from The Children's Society.



The Children's Society wants to create a society where children can be children, childhood is respected and every child is valued for who they are. We are resolute in our commitment to the most disadvantaged and those at risk; challenging of negative public attitudes towards children and young people and positive about what they can achieve. Our approach is driven by our Christian values and by the voices of children and young people, who are at the heart of all we do.