A Manifesto Club Report

Why We Should Scrap the Vetting Database

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Sue White and
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Manifesto Club Campaign Against Vetting

The Manifesto Club has been campaigning against the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act since October 2006, when we launched a petition signed by individuals including Fay Weldon, Johnny Ball and Alan Silitoe, and hundreds of volunteers, parents and concerned adults. We relaunched this petition in October 2009.

Reports: We have also published a series of reports, documenting the expansion of vetting and its damaging effect on social life, including:

The Case Against Vetting *October 2006* provides an overview of the dramatic expansion of vetting, and shows how this feeds a child protection bureaucracy, while undermining everyday relationships between adults and children.

How the Child Protection Industry Stole Christmas *December 2006* shows how overregulation is ruining seasonal celebrations.

Hobby Clubs *April 2007* documents how some mixed-age clubs are banning children.

Briefing Document *April 2008* shows how the government's new vetting laws are late, over-budget and over-stretched.

Briefing Document *July 2009*, Regulating Trust – reports on a leaked government document, and exposes officials' absurd plans for the vetting database.

Vetting Under-18s: An education in mistrust *December 2009* – shows how Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) checks are undermining teenage volunteers.

Volunteering Made Difficult: How the child protection bureaucracy is obstructing volunteers *June 2010* – shows the damaging effect of CRB checks on the voluntary sector.

See a record of our campaigning, here: www.manifestoclub.com/hubs/vetting

Foreword

The Manifesto Club has long argued that the vetting and barring scheme is disastrous for civil liberties and civil society, both eroding privacy and freedoms, and also undermining the everyday ways in which adults help and care for children in their communities.

Yet worse, the database will not actually protect children from those who are a risk. This point is forcefully made in these essays by experts in different aspects of social work: Mervyn Barrett, from the crime reduction charity Nacro, with experience in dealing with offenders; Sue White, professor of social work, with experience of child safeguarding; and David Wastell, a professor of information systems.

The message of these essays is that the vetting and barring scheme is fundamentally flawed, and needs to be reconsidered as a whole. Mervyn Barrett says that the scheme was 'ill conceived' from the start: it was set up with no sense of its limits or scope, and with an irrational doubling up between two organisations, the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) and the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). He notes that the vetting database is unique to Britain: 'no other advanced country has seen the need to develop a scheme on such a scale.'

Sue White writes that in 26 years as a practitioner, manager and researcher in child protection she had 'professionally encountered not one child that the scheme would have saved from abuse'. The scheme would have done nothing to stop high-profile abusers such as Vanessa George or Ian Huntley, who either did not have criminal records or who didn't work with their victims. 'The people involved in child sexual abuse typically do not leave a readily audited trail.'

White argues that the system is easily evaded. Paedophiles who do have records 'would certainly not seek to be vetted', but would instead 'make contact, through Facebook, My Space and chat-rooms with any number of children and young people'. She cites the case of Michael Williams, a postman, who used Facebook and Bebo to stalk and abuse hundreds of children.

While the vetting database is unlikely to stop paedophiles, Barrett judges that it is very likely that the ISA will wrongly bar innocent people from working with children or vulnerable adults. The ISA's 150 caseworkers are 'largely inexperienced', and they will be applying a much lower standard of proof than is acceptable in a criminal court.

Analysing the ISA's 'guidance for caseworkers', Barrett notes that caseworkers could bar somebody because of a long list of 'relevant conduct' that includes making a remark that causes distress, or conveying to a child that they are worthless or unloved. People could also be barred because of a list of offences 'so general that it covers most offences including those that relate to addictive behaviour or persist-

ent offending', which has 'caused consternation in the substance misuse sector where there are many former users helping current users to come off drugs'.

The most fundamental flaw in the ISA system, says Barrett, is the fact that the caseworkers will not even meet the people they are considering barring. Individuals instead will have to make written submissions, which is extremely limited and strongly biased against those 'who do not have the skills to argue their case in writing'.

Sue White and David Wastell conclude that the ISA system is a 'design disaster', and so full of contradictions and wishful thinking that it is unworkable. The Singleton review could not rescue the vetting and barring scheme, 'because the scheme itself is riddled with opportunism, panic, false assumptions and fatal design flaws'. In their view, 'the only credible way to decrease the risk posed to children by those who work or volunteer with them is to rely on the vigilance of other adults'. They say that 'Children are much safer in places where lots of people congregate. They are safer because most adults look out for children – and dangerous adults know it.' Perversely, the ISA system creates a false sense of security, which will 'tend to undermine the need for vigilance and direct responsibility of those present.'

White and Wastell argue that the substantial public resources invested in the vetting and barring scheme would be much better directed at front line services, including 'social workers, paediatricians and probation officers'. After all, 'it is frontline services and third sector organisations

who see almost all of the abusers and abused and they are sorely strapped for resources'.

At the Manifesto Club, we welcome the suspension and review of the vetting and barring scheme, and these essays will be submitted to that review. However, we argue that the review does not go nearly far enough, and instead should be expanded to consider the vetting and barring scheme as a whole. The vetting database does not need to be tweaked: the scheme needs to be fundamentally reconsidered and, ultimately, scrapped.

Josie Appleton
convenor, Manifesto Club

Mervyn Barrett

ISA Decision-Making: Barring the Innocent

In his foreword to the White Paper that led to the creation of the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB), the then Home Secretary, Michael Howard, said that we have 'to strike the right balance between the rights of some individuals to live down their past crimes and the need to safeguard other individuals'.[1] It is right that society regards the protection of children and vulnerable adults as paramount, but we have yet to strike that balance.

Under the current CRB check arrangements, people are not treated fairly, and that unfairness is likely to increase with the planned vetting and barring scheme. It will increase in part because of the sheer size and scope of the scheme and in part because of the mindset of the vetting and barring body, the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA), as evidenced by its guidance for caseworkers.[2] Underpinning this is a lack of expertise in an organisation that boasts the contrary.

There is a sense that the scheme was ill conceived. Quite apart from the bureaucratic cost of having two organisations, the CRB and the ISA, running the scheme, it appears that in the absence of a design brief there was no limit placed on the number of positions to be covered by it. I sense that every interdepartmental discussion within government on the issue resulted in more and more jobs being incorporated into the scheme regardless of cost and proportionality, and in particular with little regard to the fact that abuse in the workplace is small compared with that which takes place in the home. As a consequence, the scheme grew to 11.3 million positions before a public outcry resulted in a review by the Chairman of the ISA,

Sir Roger Singleton, and the number of positions being cut back to nine million.[3] Sir Roger also questioned the need for positions that constitute 'controlled activity' being incorporated into the scheme and asked the government to review this.

This aside, Sir Roger's review was intended to be the last word on what constitutes working with vulnerable people, but why should this be? Sir Roger was asked to address some narrow issues around what constitutes 'frequent' and 'intensive' contact with children, not to conduct a fundamental review of the scheme. We are still talking about a scheme that will cover an extraordinary number of people. In effect, the scheme 'places around nine million adults technically under suspicion of abuse', says Tim Gill, one of the UK's leading authorities on childhood, 'a third of the adult working population'.[4]

Contrast this with the situation 15 years ago when we were conducting around 600,000 child protection checks a year, and 25 years ago when there were around 100,000.[5] Nothing has changed over the past 25 years. Despite this explosive growth in checks, there is no evidence that children and vulnerable adults are any more at risk from people in work, paid and unpaid, than they were then. The ISA says that the scheme is the largest in the world. This begs the question: why is this? Why has no other advanced country seen the need to develop a scheme on such a scale? Can they all have got it so wrong? Where there are checks and vetting and barring, there is by definition discrimination. The two go hand-in-hand.

The nine million positions are presumably those that fall within the scope of the scheme (ie, fall within the law) and as such the figure is conservative. We know that many CRB checks cover jobs that are not eligible to be checked. Research shows that around 11 per cent of CRB checks are unlawful. This may be an underestimate, but it still represents hundreds of thousands of unlawful[6] checks a year. If 11% per cent of future vetting and barring checks are unlawful, and this is likely judged by enquiries to Nacro, that represents almost a million unlawful checks. Based on experience of CRB checks, I am confident that employers, local authorities in particular, will carry out large numbers of unlawful vetting and barring checks and they will get away with this for there will be no one, certainly not the CRB, enforcing the law.

As well as being too large in scope, judged by the ISA's guidance notes for caseworkers the scheme is also heavily biased against anyone

who has been the subject of a malicious allegation or otherwise has a criminal record.[7] In its 'Frequently Asked Questions' paper, the ISA poses the question, 'How will the ISA deal with false or malicious allegations?'. The answer it gives – 'Staff and board members at the ISA have a wide range of expertise, including allegations management' – is not reassuring, especially as the ISA goes on to say that any information it receives will only bar a person if its own criteria for barring are satisfied.

The criteria, as set out in the guidance notes, provide a clue as to the mindset of the ISA. There is, for example, a lack of balance in the way the caseworkers will evaluate evidence. On the one hand they will make decisions on the 'balance of probabilities', a lower test than the 'beyond reasonable doubt' test applied in criminal courts. This is not unreasonable except that the consequences for those who are barred from employment with vulnerable groups are serious given the number of posts from which they will be excluded. The guidance also says 'it can be taken as a matter of fact that, in some circumstances such as the notification of convictions, cautions and decisions by competent bodies, the event happened'. This too is not unreasonable, but the fact is that some people are wrongfully cautioned and convicted, which is why these days we have a Criminal Cases Review Commission, though it only deals with the more serious miscarriages of justice.

The guidance operates a double standard by suggesting that in rare cases it might disagree with a competent body's findings in instances where it has decided that an event did *not* happen. On acquittals, the guidance says 'at most' this means the court did not find that someone did something beyond reasonable doubt, when often it means they did not do that something, and that they are entirely innocent.

The guidance indicates that people could be barred if they engaged in 'relevant conduct'. This includes providing an inflexible regime and lack of choice to a vulnerable adult, or making any remark or comment that causes distress. It may involve conveying to a child a sense that they are worthless or unloved. These are serious matters in a safeguarding context, but given the consequences for people who are alleged to have done these things, arguably there should have been a higher threshold for barring. If you are a teacher, nurse or care worker, or indeed a parent or someone struggling to cope with caring for a loved one with dementia, there is a risk that at some point you might be accused of relevant conduct.

The ISA guidance also indicates that people could be barred if they are cautioned or convicted of a 'relevant offence'. The list is so general that it covers most offences, including those that relate to addictive behaviour or persistent offending. This has caused consternation in the substance misuse sector where there are many former users helping current users to come off drugs. The ISA has had discussions with the sector over this, but this only happened after the sector made a fuss and the guidance remains unchanged.

The ISA's claims to expertise are undermined by the guidance. It is an indication of how basic caseworkers' knowledge must be, if cautions, reprimands, final warnings and offences taken into consideration by the courts have had to be explained to them. If I was facing a possible bar following a caution or conviction, I would want that decision to be taken by someone who had come into the job with an elementary knowledge of criminal justice, especially given the lower balance of probabilities test.

However, I would not want that someone to rely on this guidance. The cautioning process as described in the guidance, for instance, is out of line with practice. Contrary to the guidance, many of those who are cautioned are not given a copy of the caution and some are not aware that they have been cautioned until they are given the results of their first CRB Disclosure check.

The guidance includes information about how the ISA will assess cases. There is nothing about what sentencing can tell us about offending. There is nothing about offence terminology. How many caseworkers will, for instance, be able to tell the difference between common assault, actual bodily harm and grievous bodily harm? The decision-making procedure is also highly subjective. What constitutes 'excessive' or 'obsessive interest' in violence in a particular case, for example, will depend on the caseworker looking at it.

The ISA requires caseworkers to exercise the sort of judgement that the judiciary or an experienced psychologist might make about a person's thinking, attitudes, beliefs, their interests and intrinsic drives, their relationships with others and their lifestyles but, unlike a judge or psychologist, having not met the person concerned. What might have been more useful is a guidance on what research and statistics tell us about risk but, rather than provide this, the ISA says it will 'over time' establish a wealth of information and knowledge about the risk factors associated with those who might cause harm to some of the most vulnerable in society.[8] Given the consequences for members of the public subject to vetting and barring

decisions, I would rather that they had this information and knowledge from the beginning.

This guidance is going to form the basis of decision-making by largely inexperienced caseworkers, who by definition are going to be risk averse. According to its annual report, the ISA has recruited 150 caseworkers and put them through a comprehensive learning and development programme.[9] However, the guidance does not inspire confidence in that programme. The report says that the skills and experience of ISA Board members will be deployed in making decisions in the most complex and sensitive cases, but presumably not in the majority of cases where caseworkers will be on their own.

The greatest flaw in the decision-making process is that the caseworkers will not interview the people they contemplate barring. Rather, they require everyone to make written submissions, even though many people do not have the skills to argue their case in writing. This is particularly true of people whose first language is not English. I have interviewed people unfairly placed on barred lists who have made clear and convincing cases in person as to why they should be taken off them, but they would not have had the skills to do so in writing. If caseworkers interviewed their subjects, they would quickly gain a better sense, for good or ill, of their character and suitability. This would speed up the decision-making process and help eliminate some of the racial inequality in the scheme.

The fact that there is no personal interview is perhaps an indication of the lack of regard and respect for people the ISA contemplate barring. There is no one on the Board representing the interests of members of the public who are subject to vetting and barring decisions, perhaps because their interests are not deemed to be important. I have never over the years had any sense that there has ever been a particular concern for or empathy with those that the barring bodies have barred or contemplated barring.

Even where people are registered by the ISA to work with vulnerable people, despite their records or the allegations made against them, some of them will still be barred from employment because of the information that will continue to appear on their CRB Disclosures. This is because many employers will continue to insist on a clear CRB Disclosure despite ISA registration. In creating a joint CRB-ISA scheme, therefore, we have created a system of double jeopardy, a system loaded against those members of the public subject to vetting and barring decisions. Where you work in

health, education or social care and have been accused of something, if the decision of one agency, the ISA, does not get you, Disclosure certificates issued by the other, the CRB, will.

This criticism matters, for the future employment prospects of millions of people, with and without records, are going to be dependent on this body and these caseworkers. If we do not get the vetting and barring scheme right, many people are going to lose their jobs, often on the basis of false or malicious allegations. All this will contribute to a society where we have large numbers of able people that are no risk to anyone but who cannot get a job because of the scheme we have put in place. There will be a cost to society as a result of this, with no obvious benefits in terms of protecting vulnerable people.

Endnotes:

1 Home Office (1996), *'On the Record: The Government's Proposals for Access to Criminal Records for Employment and Related Purposes in England and Wales'*, Home Office: London

2 ISA (2009), *'Guidance Notes for the Barring Decision Making Process'*, The Board of the Independent Safeguarding Authority

3 Singleton, R (2009), *'Drawing the Line: A report on the Government's Vetting and Barring Scheme'*, Office of Sir Roger Singleton, Chief Adviser on the Safety of Children

4 Gill, T (2009), *'No Fear: Growing up in a risk averse society'*, Calouste Gulkenbian Foundation: London

5 Unell, J (1992), *'Criminal Record Checks within the Voluntary Sector: An Evaluation of the Pilot Schemes'*, Voluntary Action Research Second Series Paper No. 2, Berkhamstead: The Volunteer Centre

6 Suff, R (2005), *'Checking out the activities of the Criminal Records Bureau'*, IRS Employment Review 483, pp42–48

7 ISA (2009), *'Guidance Notes for the Barring Decision Making Process'*, The Board of the Independent Safeguarding Authority

8 ISA (2009), *'Annual Report & Accounts 2008/9'*, The Stationery Office: London

9 ibid

Sue White and David Wastell

Catching Sex Offenders: Vigilance is the Best Safeguard

In his piece for this pamphlet, Mervyn Barrett of Nacro makes a wholly convincing case for why the proposed vetting and barring scheme, administered by the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA), fails to improve on the current Criminal Records Bureau checks, and indeed poses a further serious risk to the rehabilitation and civil liberties of those trying to turn their lives around following involvement in the criminal justice system.

He is right that many of the vulnerable people this scheme alleges to be trying to protect are likely to be its victims. We concur completely his analysis of how the incremental and escalating risk-avoidance of successive government departments commenting on this legislation has spawned an unsteady ship of toppling and unwieldy proportion, poised on a dangerous course. Here we will address two related matters which are informed by our respective areas of expertise – child abuse, professional practice and decision-making (White), and systems design (Wastell). In its current form, we will argue that the vetting and barring scheme will not only fail to protect children, but will have a range of direct and indirect perverse effects as a result of faulty design.

The scheme's formula is based on two constructs, whose operational definitions have proved to be very vexing: 'frequency' and 'intensity' of contact with children or vulnerable adults. In an attempt to steer between the precautionary principle, 'it must never happen again', and the threats to civil liberties, the vetting and barring scheme has set itself on an absurd voyage.

In 2009, Ed Balls, then the children's secretary, asked Sir Roger Singleton, Chair of the Independent Safeguarding Authority to review the definitions of 'frequent' and 'intensive' activity, which would require someone to register on the database. These were consequently revised, with the definition of frequency changed from once a month or more, to once a week or more; and intensity revised from three to four days or more in a single month, or overnight. At a stroke this took the number of adults affected by the scheme from 11.3 million to 9 million. These changes were largely crafted to remove from the Scheme two particularly vocal groups, children's authors visiting schools and the parents of children on foreign exchange trips. The secretary of state's response to Singleton's recommendations was as follows:

> **'We believe that these adjustments to the scheme are proportionate and that they will be supported by parents, employers and by those who work or volunteer with children and vulnerable adults. The changes they will bring about are faithful to the two fundamental principles of allowing parents to make their own private arrangements without interference, and ensuring that requirements set by the state do the minimum necessary to protect children and the vulnerable.'**[1]

In fact, the changes do not rescue the scheme, because the scheme itself is riddled with opportunism, panic, false assumptions and fatal design flaws. An *intrinsically* ill-considered idea has been spawned, based on a collection of poorly thought-out notions. Car park attendants and kitchen staff in the NHS, for example, deemed to be involved in 'controlled activities' are covered by the Scheme, not so a self-employed violin instructor working with a child alone in their own home.

One can see how this arbitrary and inconsistent net-widening has transpired, because the scheme is vulnerable to an endless series of 'what ifs?', always and necessarily modified by the knowledge that there are some levels of state interference and control that simply will not be tolerated and cannot be policed or enforced. However, it is clear from these inconsistencies that the scheme is less about protecting children than protecting government and employing agencies from anticipated public outrage in response to future adverse events.

In late 2009, the Department for Children, Schools and Families published its notorious 'myth-buster' web-page.[2] This was intended to dispel the confusion wrought by 'irresponsible' media coverage, examples of which are described as *Myths*, such as 'a measure like this will not truly increase the safety of children' (*The Independent*, 18 July). These are systematically refuted by the marshalling of so-called *Facts*, in this case 'the [vetting and barring scheme] will make it much harder for anyone who is known to pose a risk to children, to gain access to children through paid or unpaid work'. Even in its own terms, the logic of the 'fact' crumbles at the slightest critical test. While the scheme may make it harder for those 'known to pose a risk' to gain access, what if they are not known, or find another route? Or more subtlety, what if the number of 'false alarms' and 'misses' overwhelms the ability of the system to make meaningful discriminations?

In truth, it is the self-styled fact, as an exercise in wishful thinking, which constitutes the real myth. So self-defeatingly labyrinthine in its attempts to elucidate what kinds of situations would, and would not, be covered, the 'myth buster' could easily be mistaken for the satire of a latter-day Swift intent on bringing down the scheme!

How has this happened, the critical observer is compelled to ask? We believe that the ISA finds itself in this predicament because it, or rather the battalions who have incrementally drafted the legislation and guidance, have failed to understand that the boundaries between the public and private are not distinct, and moreover that children are most unsafe in the spaces that this legislation deems 'private'. So how did they get here?

Established after the deaths of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman in Soham in 2002, the Bichard Report, published on 22 June 2004, made 31 recommendations, of which recommendation 19 called for a new registration scheme and stated:

> **'New arrangements should be introduced requiring those who wish to work with children or vulnerable adults, to be registered. This register – perhaps supported by a card or licence – would confirm that there is no known reason why an individual should not work with these client groups.'[3]**

That government felt the need to act on this is unsurprising, and while there had been failures in offender management in relation to Ian Huntley, the perpetrator, it is noteworthy that he was the boyfriend of Maxine Carr,

who worked at Holly and Jessica's school. He was not himself on the staff of that school. In fact, evidence beyond the anecdotal, that certain iconic cases would have been prevented by the vetting and barring scheme, is notable by its absence. It would not, for example, have prevented the recent Plymouth nursery case where Vanessa George, and the co-accused Angela Allen and Colin Blanchard, were convicted of sexual abuse. To deal with another Huntley, one would have to vet the partners of all who work, or volunteer to work, with children and vulnerable adults. This would not wash politically, and would be impossibly impractical anyway, since households are porous places, with people moving constantly in and out. And at what point does a visitor to a teacher's home need to be vetted, what would be the criteria of frequency and intensity here?

One simply cannot deal with any future Vanessa George because the people involved in child sexual abuse typically do not leave a readily audited trail. Indeed it is possible that, had she not met accomplices over the internet, George may never actually have perpetrated any crime or betrayed her unsavoury drives and desires. At this point comes the cry from the scheme's supporters, 'if it protects one child, then it must be done'. Rhetorically potent, but a lazy and flawed argument, valid only if the scheme were neutral in all other respects, in terms of its financial and social costs. But it is not.

Mervyn Barrett has outlined the possible impact on ex-offenders. Reflecting on 26 years as a practitioner, manager and researcher in child protection, one of us (White) has professionally encountered not one child that the scheme would have saved from abuse, and many vulnerable young people it would have directly damaged.

For example, imagine you are 16 years old, you are 'looked after' by the local authority, you have been moved into a local placement because there is no money to pay for the out-of-borough residential therapeutic placement where you have lived for the past year. You have been out on the town and are a bit high on booze and pills. In the queue for a taxi, someone pushes in and there is a confrontation with another boy, resulting in physical violence. The police are called; they note that you are verbally abusive, and you are both cautioned. The other boy was 15, so data exist to show that you committed a violent crime against a child.[4] In the next few turbulent years you struggle with drug use and acquire several non-violent offences, such as shoplifting and trying to cash a stolen cheque. You are now 22 years old and want to work as a volunteer in a third sector, young person's service

and to train to be social worker. In addition to the CRB process, you will be ISA vetted. The ISA employee who will review your case, one of a small army of such caseworkers, will read your history. They will not meet you; they are not psychiatrists, or social workers, or qualified in any professional capacity, although they have been 'trained' in the ISA 'decision-making proceedure'. They will inspect your record, also applying so-called 'structured' judgements about your personality and lifestyle.

Of course, it will not look good. Criteria in the ISA case workers' guidance on risk factors for 'Self Management and Lifestyle' include the following: poor emotional arousal management skills; poor problem solving and/or coping skills; poor coping in response to provocation; presence of impulsive, chaotic, unstable lifestyle, and so on.[5] Having limited discretion and experience, what else could be resolved other than to assign you to the category 'minded to bar', at which point, both you and the agency for which you wish to volunteer will be told that you have been referred for a decision. At that point, the experts in the ISA review your case and you are invited to be present and make representations, but the damage is done. These vulnerable young people will be among the casualties, and there will be other effects which are not knowable yet, but about which one can hazard an informed guess.

Children are much safer in places where lots of people congregate. They are safer because most adults look out for children – this is a social fact, not a myth, and dangerous adults know it. The answer to uncovering a future Vanessa George, who would never have been detected by the vetting and barring scheme, is vigilance from other staff. This is increased by feelings of collective responsibility and the social awareness it spawns. It is not likely to be heightened by the assumption, however subliminal and subtle, that if the ISA says that somebody is ok, then they are ok – quite the opposite. The official authorisation of ISA clearance will tend to undermine the need for vigilance and direct responsibility of those present.

A related and crucial point is the misunderstanding about the nature and circumstances of child abuse and particularly sexual abuse. We have noted that children are most at risk from people who would be deemed by this scheme to be in the category 'private'. The internet has exponentially increased the number of adults to whom children can be exposed outside of the gaze of the state.

If one were a predatory paedophile with a traceable history (which many do not have), one would certainly not seek to be vetted. One could make contact, though, through Facebook, My Space and chat-rooms with any number of children and young people. Research has shown that there are a significant number of young people who have been contacted by strangers online. Indeed, the activities of Michael Williams, a postman, have come to light and he has admitted using Facebook and Bebo to stalk and abuse hundreds of children. Some 31% of 9–19 year-olds, who go online at least weekly report receiving unwanted sexual comments via email, chat, instant messenger or text message, with 12–14 year olds tending to talk to strangers online more than older teenagers. This fits with what we know about younger children's limited ability to understand the complexities of relationships with others.[6] Add to this the vast numbers of workers from overseas in our public services whose history cannot be traced. And on, and on – the complications multiply, as the myths of the scheme meet the real facts of the real world.

To conclude, we believe that the only credible way to decrease the already statistically negligible risk posed to children by those who work, or volunteer to work with them, is to rely on the vigilance of the adults in those situations and the capacity of children to look out for themselves and each other and keep themselves safe.[7] Scarce public resources should be directed at front-line workers, including professionals such as social workers, police, paediatricians, psychiatrists, probation officers working with the most vulnerable, the troubled, the difficult and the dangerous. It is frontline services and third sector organisations who see almost all of the abusers and abused and they are sorely strapped for resources. In particular, we do not want to deter those who have experienced difficult life events from coming forward to help others currently affected by those very same issues – if we are to realise the 'Big Society', these are the people we need.

The vetting and barring scheme is a design disaster. The money that is spent on this scheme would be far better deployed on third sector projects, statutory adult and children's social care and offender management.

Endnotes:

1 The Secretary of State For Children, Schools and Families response to Sir Roger Singleton's report- 'Drawing the Line', http://www.isa-gov.org.uk/default.aspx?page=414, last accessed 25 May 2010.

2 The site was located at http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/news/index.cfm?event=news.item&id=vetting_and_barring_myth_buster

3 http://www.bichardinquiry.org.uk/10663/report.pdf

4 This young person would be deemed a 'Schedule 1 offender' The Children and Young Persons Act – a designation currently under debate and review given to anyone, including a young person, who has been convicted of an offence against a child that is listed in Schedule 1 to the Children and Young Persons Act 1933 and subsequent relevant legislation. Many of these are incidents of peer to peer assault or sexual activity, where the victim is a child, but so is the offender.

5 Guidance Notes for the Barring Decision Making Process. http://www.isa-gov.org/pdf/GuidanceNotesforBarringDecisionMakingProcessweb.pdf

6 A range of research is reviewed in DCSF, 2008, Safer Children in a Digital World The Report of the Byron Review (access at www.dcsf.gov.uk/byronreview)

7 The following website details one such project. www.maxconflictmanagement.com

About the Authors

David Wastell is Professor of Information Systems at Nottingham University Business School. His interests in technology and work developed during an extended period at Manchester University, first in the Medical School and subsequently in Computer Science. He was appointed Professor of the Information Society at Salford University in 2000 where he helped establish a leading international group specialising in Information Systems research. Subsequently he moved to UMIST, before transferring to Nottingham in 2005. David has organized a number of international conferences and other colloquia, and has published widely in a spectrum of research journals. His current interests are in public sector reform, innovation and design, and cognitive ergonomics. He has extensive local government experience, as consultant and action researcher, and is currently working closely with Stockport and Salford. Dave is co-author of the SPRINT methodology, which provides a framework for service design and innovation, and is widely used in the local government community. In 2001, he helped develop MADE, a multi-agency data exchange for crime policy which continues to support community safety partnerships in Lancashire.

Mervyn Barrett is the Head of Resettlement Information at Nacro, the crime reduction charity. In 29 years with the organisation he has written extensively about crime, resettlement, and criminal justice. He has provided training and guidance around criminal record checks, having followed their development since the early 1980s. His responsibilities include the Nacro helpline, which has dealt with tens of thousands of CRB Disclosure enquiries over the past few years. Nacro does not believe that the Independent Safeguarding Authority (ISA) should necessarily be scrapped, but that the Criminal Records Bureau and ISA need to be radically overhauled to ensure that systems are proportionate, effective and just.

Sue White is Professor of Social Work at the University of Lancaster. She is a registered social worker and qualified at the University of Leeds in 1983. She was employed as a practitioner and manager in statutory children's services for 13 years and then took up an academic post at the University of Manchester. Her research has focused principally on the analysis of professional decision-making in child welfare, with a particular emphasis on safeguarding. She has recently completed two influential Research Council funded studies – the first focusing on electronic information sharing in multidisciplinary child welfare practice; and the second on the relationship between performance management of public services responsible for safeguarding children, and the impact of anticipated blame within the decision making practices of those providing, supervising and managing children's services. During 2009, Sue served on the Social Work Task Force, charged with undertaking a comprehensive review of frontline social work practice in England. She sits on the Reform Board and the College Development Board. She is currently Chair of the Association of Professors of Social Work and Editor in Chief of Child and Family Social Work. Sue will be taking up a post as Professor of Social Work (Children and Families) at the University of Birmingham on 1 August 2010.

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