

18 May 2016

**OPEN LETTER TO OFSTED, CARE QUALITY COMMISSION, HM INSPECTORATE OF CONSTABULARY,  
HM INSPECTORATE OF PROBATION - AND THE CROWN PROSECUTION SERVICE**

Dear Sir/Madam

We write to express our concerns in relation to current professional practice, particularly in cases linked to faith or belief and more broadly in engagement of families by children's services.

This letter is particularly pertinent in light of recent media reports into Dudley and Staffordshire children's services; and their respective challenges to protect children.

Whilst our concerns are not limited to Dudley or Staffordshire, both authorities, in our view, have jointly failed to appropriately respond in the face of recent concerns linked to faith or belief, by a mother being supported by VCF.

Anecdotal evidence from other cases has also highlighted the lack of understanding by statutory agencies, of the underlying factors of what is being presented or recorded, often leading to detrimental consequences for children, including children of parent survivors.

The tragic death of Kristy Bamu in 2010, from ritual abuse, brought a timely focus to efforts to address child abuse linked to witchcraft and spirit possession, yet a missed opportunity to learn lessons, through a framework, from this case, despite the involvement of six London boroughs. For the first time in the history of child abuse linked to a belief system in Britain, we witnessed both a child death and young survivors in one case.

Indicators of abuse linked to beliefs have not always been highlighted in past child deaths, many were treated as simply child abuse cases. Kristy was a victim of child abuse, yet his surviving siblings helped to secure prosecutions and justice for the extreme physical abuse linked to witchcraft, they and their brother had suffered, whilst having to relive their own experiences surrounding his death.

It is encouraging that 'belief or faith' has now been included as a category for recording, for the first time in the Child in Need Consensus 2016-17 for statutory partners, and offers an opportunity to gauge the prevalence alongside other initiatives.

Whilst, we believe harmful practices linked to faith or belief should be treated in the same way as any other abuse on a child, it is of paramount importance that practitioners are able to identify and respond appropriately to this form of abuse. The increase in reported cases to-date, as a result of a multi-agency response and concerted effort since 2011, is an early indicator that cases linked to faith or belief cannot continue to be overlooked if we are to improve outcomes for affected children and families.

The National Working Group on Child Abuse linked to faith or belief comprises representatives from statutory, voluntary, community and faith organisations, as well as individuals and survivors with specialist knowledge and experience. Yet, despite the efforts of VCF and other specialist organisations, we continue to see court-directed assessments for aspects of faith or belief, constrained within the required 26-week timeline, other than where there are permitted exemptions; thus our plea for faith or belief implications to be considered in assessments, and reflected in wider practice, prior to proceedings.

The involvement of families within child protection processes continues to present a challenge, yet until there is documented evidence that family concerns (or views) have been considered and addressed – at the right time, in the right way, we will continue to find it difficult to move forward, with the changing child agenda, to a point where every child can be protected from harm.

Yours faithfully



Mor Dioum  
VCF Co-Founder and Director

### Additional Information

- The Victoria Climbié Foundation (VCF) was established by Mr and Mrs Climbié (Victoria's parents) to campaign for improvements in child protection policies and practices and to ensure effective links & coordination between statutory agencies, care services and communities. [www.vcf-uk.org](http://www.vcf-uk.org)
- VCF leads the National Working Group on Child Abuse linked to Faith or Belief. This is an established policy group, offering multi-agency response and oversight of the national action plan launched by the coalition Government in August 2012 with a view to assist practitioner understanding, and to increase reporting within the community: <http://vcf-uk.org/about-2/national-working-group-on-child-abuse-linked-to-faith-or-belief/>
- A 2-year research project led by the Abuse Studies team at the Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), in partnership with The Victoria Climbié Foundation (VCF) and Churches Child Protection Advisory Service (CCPAS), offers a first phase survey to explore practitioner knowledge about child abuse linked to faith and belief: in search of effective intervention: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/childabusefaithbelief>
- VCF contributed to the Victims' Taskforce led by Sir Keir Starmer QC and Baroness Lawrence which published its taskforce report and recommendations for improvements to the criminal justice system to cater for the rights, protection and support for victims (Feb 2015). VCF remains as a stakeholder to the Victims' Forum in support of the Victims of Crime Bill introduced to parliament on 20 October 2015. [http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/Victims\\_Taskforce\\_Report.pdf](http://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/Victims_Taskforce_Report.pdf)
- Voices from the front line: supporting our social workers in the delivery of quality services to children – a research paper by the Victoria Climbié Foundation and HCL Social Care to explore the current social work system and its ability to achieve the expectations of the Children and Families Act 2014. <http://vcf-uk.org/vcf-calls-for-urgent-action-in-new-research-voices-from-the-front-line/>
- Briggs, S. (2015) *Engaging children and families; the role of advocacy within child protection*. The Victoria Climbié Foundation UK. VCF casework plays an important part in the work of the Foundation. Gaining an evaluative overview of this work provides evidence of the quality of work undertaken, and how VCF works with individual cases to improve the experiences of individuals and families. <http://vcf-uk.org/engaging-children-and-families-the-role-of-advocacy-within-child-protection-a-pilot-study/>
- 'My Languages Matter; the multilingual outlook for children in care – A White Paper. The Victoria Climbié Foundation UK and Mothertongue explore the impact of linguistic and cultural heritage through child protection work. Are we effectively considering the relevance of these themes when we are making decision in the best interest of the child <http://vcf-uk.org/my-languages-matter-the-multilingual-outlook-for-children-in-care>
- VCF has signed Memorandum of Cooperation with local community group, Unity in Vision, to deliver its community and family engagement models across Dorset, which encompasses an approach to address the growing challenge shrinking statutory services face in trying to engage with BME families and communities to help prevent any escalation of neglect and harm to children <http://vcf-uk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Press-Release-VCFUinV.pdf>