



National Children's
Bureau

An analysis of Local Safeguarding Children Boards' threshold documents

Summary of research carried out on behalf of the
All Party Parliamentary Group for Children

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1. Introduction

1.1 Why we carried out this analysis

This report sets out in detail the methodology and findings of an analysis of a sample of threshold documents published by Local Children's Safeguarding Boards (LSCBs) in England. This research was undertaken by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) on behalf of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Children (APPGC) to inform its Inquiry into children's social care thresholds.

The purpose of the analysis was to provide insight into the degree of variation in children's social care thresholds between local authority areas.

The analysis aimed to:

- Assess, in broad terms, the extent to which threshold documents for different local areas specified different levels of support or intervention for children with similar levels of need, and vice versa
- Identify specific examples of such contrasting descriptions of thresholds.

It is important to note that it is difficult to draw firm conclusions about the support that children receive in local areas through this analysis alone. The APPGC's Inquiry was also informed by surveys of social workers, Directors of Children's Services and Lead Members for children's services, alongside oral evidence given by a range of experts. The overall findings and recommendations of the Inquiry are set out in the report: *Storing Up Trouble: A postcode lottery of children's social care*.

1.2 About LSCB threshold documents

Under Section 13 of the Children Act 2004, local authorities are required to set up Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs) with representation from partner organisations including health commissioners, police, and youth offending teams. The role of the LSCB is to coordinate activities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in the local authority area. The statutory guidance, *Working Together to Safeguard Children*, requires each LSCB to publish a threshold document to set out the process and criteria for providing early help and making referrals to children's social care.¹ Following reforms, introduced through the Children and Social Work Act 2017, LSCBs will cease to exist in their current form. Local authorities, police and health commissioners will, however, still be required to jointly publish threshold documents as part of these new arrangements.²

In practice, threshold documents are primarily a resource for professionals working in universal services and those initially processing referrals. Where it is deemed that a child should be assessed or child protection inquiry should be carried out, these are led by social workers, drawing on much more detailed guidance and training. According to social workers surveyed for the APPGC inquiry, threshold documents

¹ Department for Education (2015) *Working together to safeguard children: A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*

² Department for Education (2018) *Working Together to Safeguard Children A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*

were the second most influential factor (after their own individual professional judgement) in deciding which level of support or intervention a child should receive.

A typical threshold document comprises:

- General information about the safeguarding and referrals processes in the local area
- Legal definitions of children in need and various forms of abuse
- A description of different levels of support and intervention. This is usually arranged over four levels - with level one describing when no additional support is needed and level four describing when there is a major child protection concern. This information is used in the analysis as described in 2.3, below.
- An appendix or large table setting out specific indicators of need that children and families may display, arranged under headings corresponding to the (usually four) levels of intervention of support. This is the main subject of the analysis.

1.3 Our approach

The analysis also piloted a methodology that aimed to generate numeric and visual representations of the findings. NCB are seeking feedback on the research design and presentation to inform future work. If you have any comments, suggestions or questions in this regard, please contact Keith Clements kcllements@ncb.org.uk.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sampling

A representative sample of 40 local authority areas was drawn up taking into account deprivation, Ofsted judgements, number of referrals to children's social care and spend per child in need. Three of these local authority areas did not have threshold documents suitable for analysis, leaving a total of 37 threshold documents, representing around a quarter of local authority areas in England, which were analysed.³

2.2 Topics and search terms

Each document was analysed focussing on the approach it set out for five issues: domestic violence between parents; self-harm; housing problems; bullying, and physical abuse. The analysis used a set range of search terms for each topic to capture as many clearly relevant references as possible. See Appendix 1 for more detail.

2.3 Categorising levels of support

The analysis categorised the levels of support or intervention recommended by the documents. These were:

- **Level A – Early help** is recommended but this is to be led by **universal services** without support from children's social care;
- **Level B – Early help** is recommended and this involves some kind of advice, coordination or additional service from **children's social care**;
- **Level C** – The child is considered potentially a '**Child in Need**' so should be referred to children's social care for assessment and support under s.17 of the Children Act; and
- **Level D** – Urgent referral to children's social care, so that s.47 inquiries, **child protection** plans and/or emergency accommodation (S20) orders can be considered.

2.4 Categorising levels of need

The analysis categorised the documents' references to the five issues above on a scale of 1 to 6, with 1 being the least severe or lowest risk and 6 being the most severe or highest risk. References were coded as whole sentences, rather than individual words or phrases. The coding was based on a detailed coding guide (see Appendix 2), which was aligned with the wording of the Children Act 1989. This was piloted with 4 documents and augmented with specific examples from the pilot to ensure a consistent system of coding had been established. Coding was checked again at the end of the analysis for overall consistency. Examples of references and how they were categorised are set out in figure 1, above.

³ Two of the selected local authority areas had a combined LSCB covering their neighbouring jurisdictions, so only one document was analysed for the two areas. Two documents were considered to have an unusual structure or format which was not amenable to the chosen methodology.

Figure 1. Examples of references to the five topics explored and how there were coded by the level of need they appeared to describe

	Domestic violence	Self harm	Housing problems	Bullying	Physical abuse
1	Periods of unemployment of the wage earning parent(s) causing stress		Accommodation meets most of the needs of child. Some concerns about longer term stability		There is concern that the child is in a culture where harmful practices are known to have been performed however parents are opposed to the practices in respect of their children.
2	Family arguments causing stress within the family	Child self harms causing minor injury and the parents respond appropriately.	The family's accommodation is stable however the home itself is not kept clean and tidy and is not always free of hazards which could impact on the safety and wellbeing of the child.	Child/young person subject to discrimination through social inequity and negative life experiences	Multiple A&E attendances causing concern
3	Family characterised by conflict and serious, chronic relationship difficulties	Self-harm requiring support from services	Inadequate /poor quality or overcrowded accommodation	Subject to bullying	Frequent unexplained minor injuries and/or delay in seeking medical attention
4	Recurring aggression, controlling behaviours & violence in the home	Presents a physical risk to themselves or others, including through more serious self-harm or suicidal ideation	Housing places child at risk of significant harm	Victimisation by others places the child / young person at risk of significant harm	Suspected non-accidental injury/abuse/neglect
5	Significant family discord and persistent domestic violence	self-harm or suicide attempts		Child is victimised through sexual or physical assault by another child	Subject to physical, emotional or sexual abuse / neglect
6				The child is a victim of serious and/or repeated and/or escalating acts of bullying, including sexual bullying.	..there is significant and persistent ...honour based violence / forced marriage

2.5 Analysis

If the threshold documents were consistent across local authority areas, we would expect the two categorisation systems to closely align. For example, level A support would be prescribed for category 1 and 2 references, B for 2 and 3, C for 3 and 4 D 4 and 5. The conclusions of the analysis are based on the extent to which was the case, and on the specific examples of inconsistency it identified.

2.6 Limitations

As stressed above, this analysis can only give limited insight into the support or intervention children actually receive, as decisions about this are made based on a number of factors. Many children who are known to children's social care are subject to range of risks and additional needs, rather than just one of the five issues that we looked at.

In developing the methodology described above we attempted to deliver a systematic approach to the analysis that could be carried out in a limited timescale. In spite of these efforts there will inevitably remain a degree of subjectivity at play, particularly in application of the coding system described in 2.4. Furthermore, the overall structure and style of a threshold document, including its use of language, may affect how individual parts of it are interpreted in practice. The methodology makes not assessment or adjustment for this.

The way the findings are set out below does not give insight into whether individual local areas have higher or lower thresholds across the board. Although some variation within documents was observed (see general observations, below), the detailed findings below do make no separate assessment of this.

3. Findings

3.1 General observations

Most threshold documents described levels of intervention or support at three out of the four levels described in 2.3, above. All documents described support at level D but 'Child in Need' services were sometimes subsumed within this (so they did not have a separate level C). The documents also described different approaches to early help, with either one or two levels being described (A and/or B). Documents frequently described support at levels A, B and D or B,C and D for example.

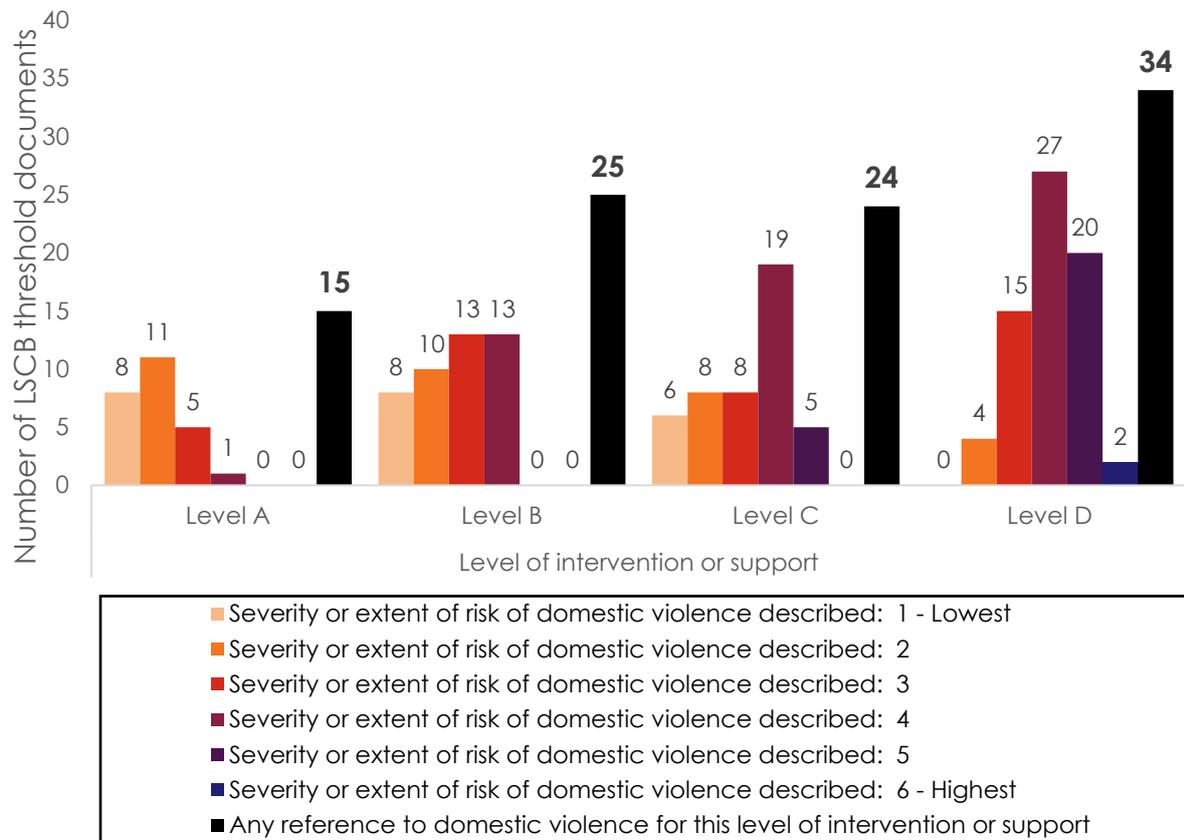
In terms of level of need described by references to the five topics we explored, these were mostly categorised at levels 2 to 4. Documents often included more than one reference to a particular topic under the same intervention level. These references often described different levels of need (as defined by our coding system). This may indicate variation in the relationship between level of need and level of service prescribed *within* individual documents, as well as between them. In practice this would mean that a threshold could be applied differently depending on which part of the document is followed.

The documents analysed varied in the level of detail they went into in describing needs, with the most detailed commenting on mitigating protecting factors and impact on the child of particular needs and risks. Some used more general terminology such as 'housing issues'. Some included several issues or level of risk within one sentence, for example including a *risk* of physical abuse alongside *established instances*, or referring to diverse issues such as learning disability and honour based violence within the same sentence (In this analysis such references were coded at the highest relevant category of need).

3.2 Domestic violence

The vast majority of documents analysed for this Inquiry (34 out of 37) suggested that serious, persistent, domestic violence is always treated as serious safeguarding issue (at level D). However, the level of domestic violence required to initiate a s.47 inquiry appeared to vary between local authority areas. For example, in some areas, referrals to children's social care for suspected domestic violence were not encouraged unless it met a certain degree of severity, consistency or has a clear impact on the child. There was also variation in the extent to which precursors to domestic violence, such as family conflict, were included at the early help level. To give an example of differing thresholds in relation to this issue, "incidents of domestic violence" were referred to at level A in two documents but at level D in three others. "Family characterised by conflict and serious chronic relationship problems" appeared at level A in one area but at level D in four others. An overview of how domestic violence was addressed by the documents is set out in figure 2, below.

Figure 2: Where and how domestic violence between parents was referred to in threshold documents



As set out in figure 2, above, 15 documents referred to domestic violence at level A, 25 did so at level B, 24 at level C and 34 at level D. The severity or risk described in each case largely reflected the level of intervention. However, it is notable that 13 cases coded as category 4 appeared at level B in the threshold documents. This means that children witnessing multiple established instances of domestic violence (as opposed to a potential risk of such instances) in these areas may only be considered for early help and not receive any statutory assessment

3.3 Self-harm

Threshold documents suggested a variety of approaches to the issue of self-harm. In some documents, descriptors of early self-harm such as “single episode of self-harm (including substance misuse)” and “Self harm with suicidal thoughts” were an indicator for early help (levels A and B) whereas in several other threshold documents, the only reference to self-harm was for more severe instances at level D. These severe instances could include, “life-threatening self-harm” or “a child self-harms [repeatedly], the harm is life threatening, and the parent does not respond appropriately”. There was also variation between threshold documents in the degree of self-harm that would trigger either a s.17 assessment or s.47 inquiry.

Figure 3: Where and how self-harm was referred to in threshold documents

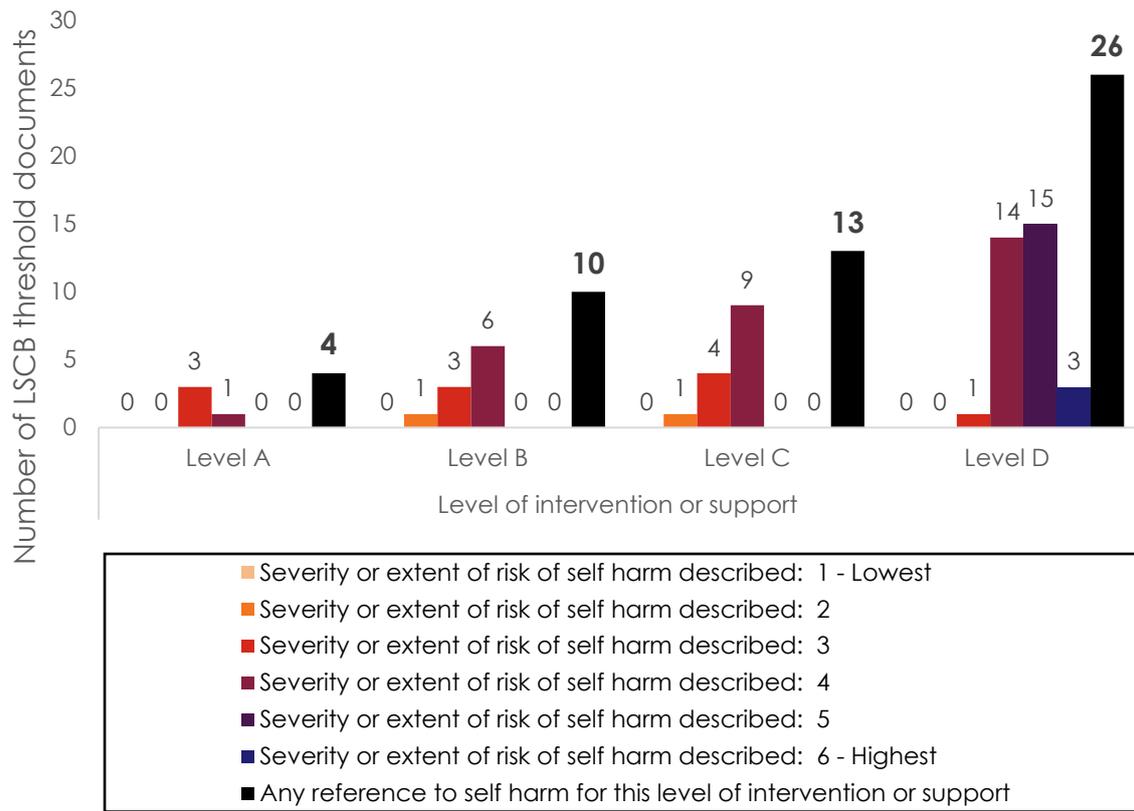
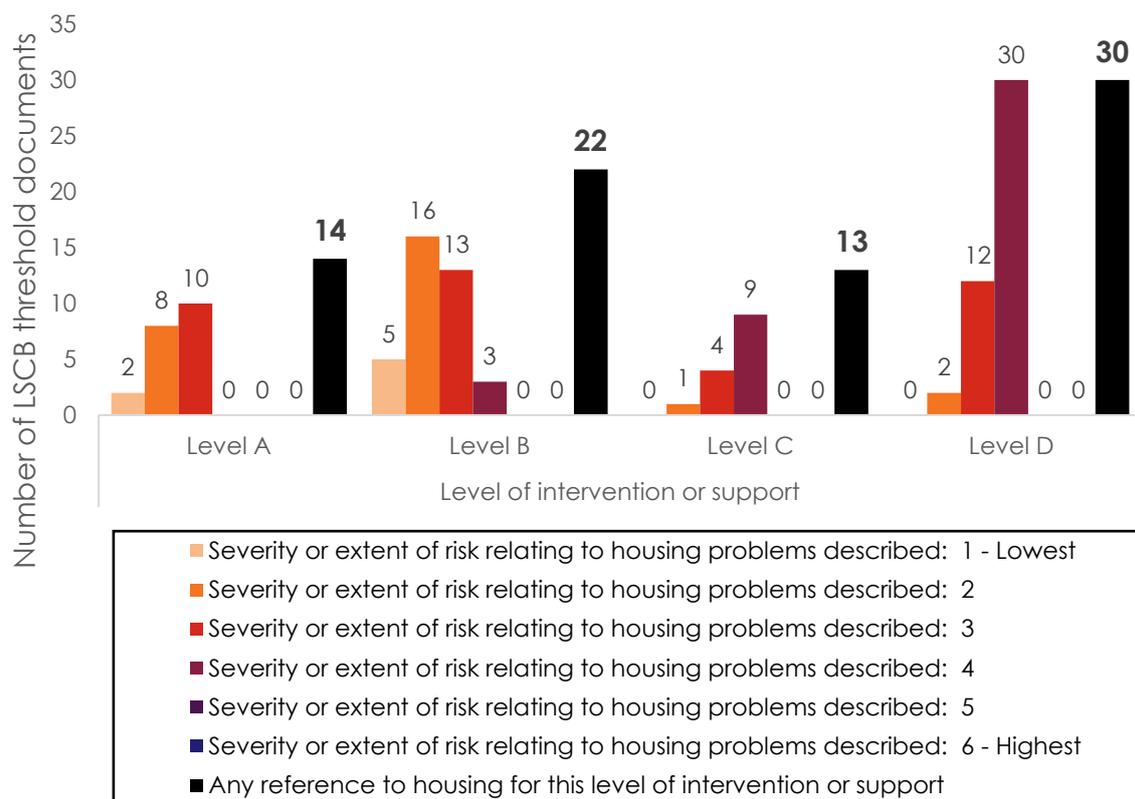


Figure 3, above shows that four documents made reference to self-harm at level A, 10 did so at level B, 13 at level C and 26 at level D. The most serious cases (coded as category 5 or 6) only appeared at level D, whereas more moderate cases (category 3 and 4) were referred to at all levels of intervention or support. This suggests there may be variation between different local authority areas in terms of the agreed response to less extreme cases of self-harm.

3.4 Housing

Poor and overcrowded housing also appeared at different intervention levels in different local areas. Some documents refer to these issues at multiple levels. For example “Overcrowded housing” was at levels A, B or C depending on the authority in question. The same was true of ‘housing in a poor state of repair’. Housing only appeared to become a child protection issue (level D) when conditions presented an immediate danger to the child. Some documents did not address housing *quality* at all, but did mention housing *stability* or homelessness. There was also inconsistency about the appropriate level of response to families who are at risk of homelessness.

Figure 4: where and how housing was referred to in threshold documents



Out of the 37 documents reviewed, 14 made reference to housing problems at level A, 22 did so at level B, 13 at level C and 30 at level D. Most documents which referred to housing at levels C and D described more severe or high risk cases (category 4). Most references to housing at levels A and B described low to moderate severity or risk. The appearance of moderate cases (category 3) across all levels suggests that there may be inconsistency in response to ongoing issues such as overcrowding and poor state of repair. This is in contrast to the clearer pattern of references to immediate danger from housing conditions (category 4) being mostly concentrated at Level D.

3.5 Bullying

The ways in which bullying is addressed within threshold documents vary in a similar way to self-harm (above).

Children “experiencing bullying” (or “victims of” or “affected by”) were categorised as level A in some areas, level B in some others, whilst some documents made no reference to bullying at all. Some areas included “severe and/or persistent bullying” at level C while others placed it at level D. “Child subject to discrimination” was an indicator for level A in several areas, whilst this was an indicator for level C in several others.

Figure 5: where and how bullying was referred to in threshold documents

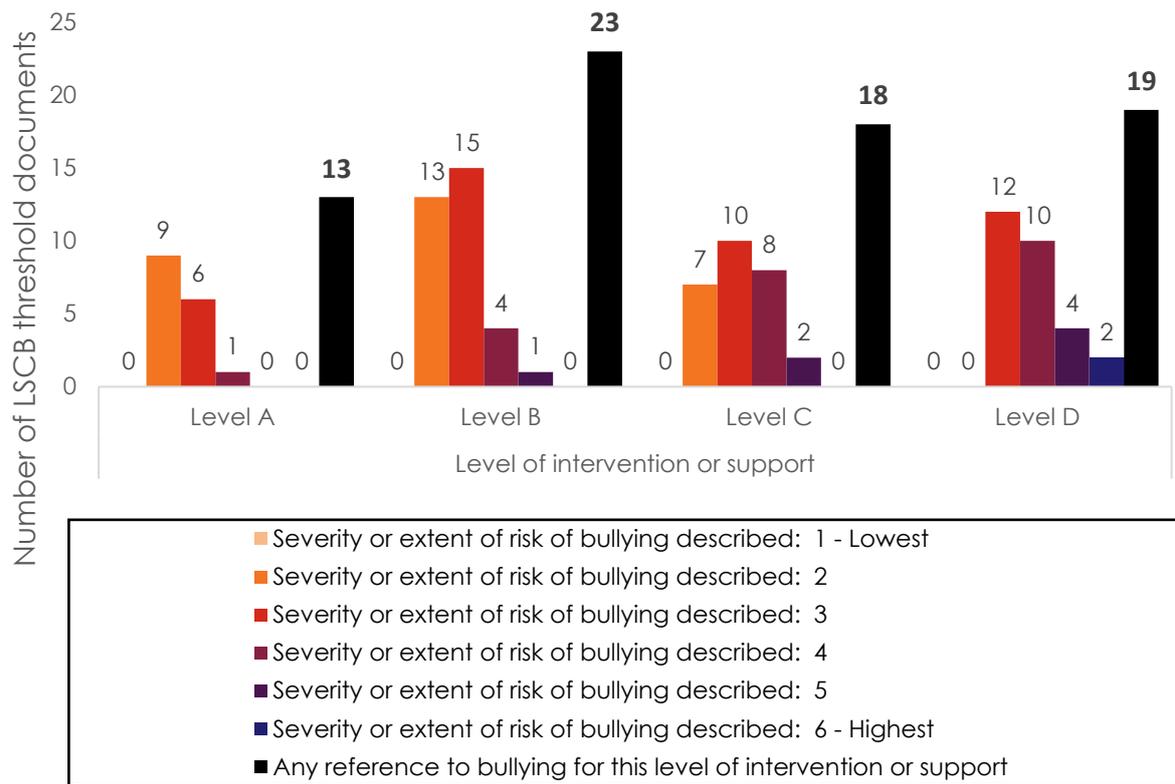
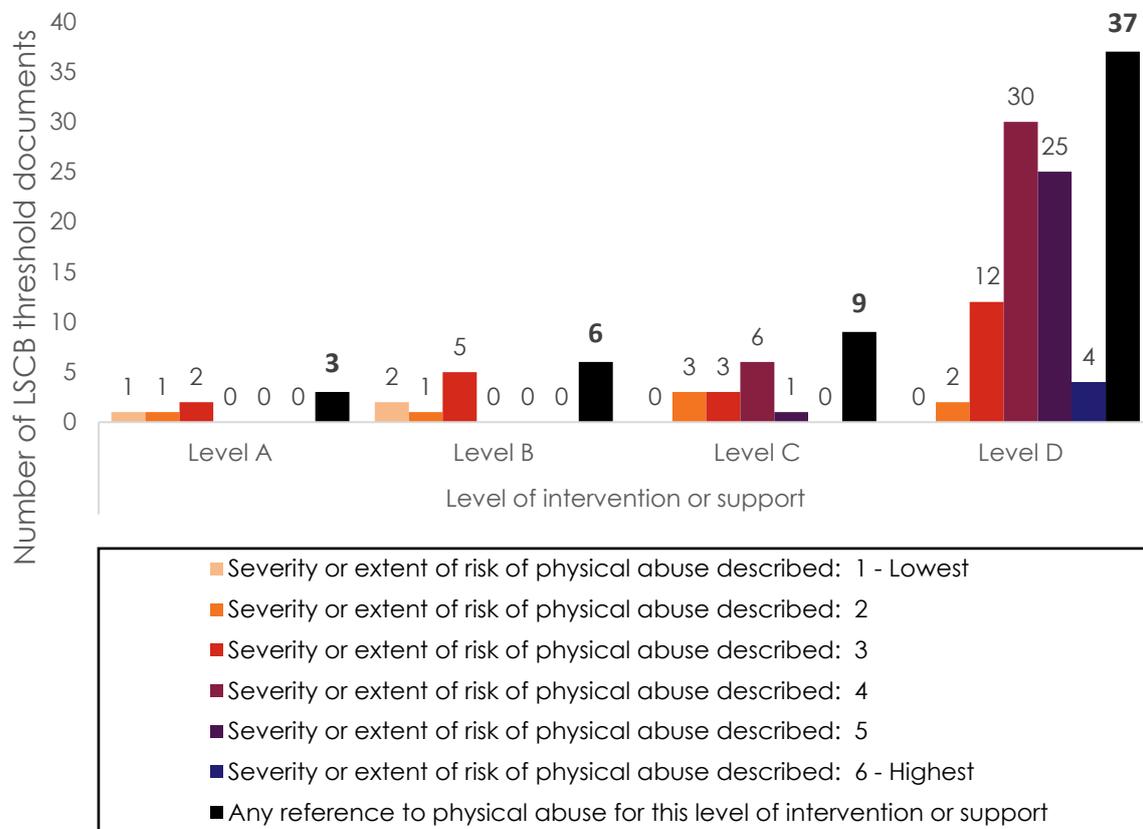


Figure 5 shows that around two thirds of the threshold documents (23 out 37) referred to bullying under level B. Most of these described a moderate severity of risk (with 13 coded as category 2, and 15 as category 3). Interestingly, there was only a limited difference in the severity of cases described across the four levels of intervention. For example, moderate severity cases (coded as category 3 or 4) appeared at all levels of intervention, with the number of documents with references coded as category 3 not differing much (ranging from 6 to 15 across the four intervention levels). In practice this means that in one local authority area a child's experience of bullying may result in a child protection inquiry, whilst in another their school would be expected to address the situation without contacting children's social care.

3.6 Physical abuse

Figure 6: where and how physical abuse of the child was referred to in threshold documents



We found that threshold documents were generally aligned when looking at physical abuse. As set out in figure 6, above, the 37 documents we analysed made reference to physical abuse of the child at level D and 9 at level C, but just 6 doing so at level B and 3 at level A. However, there were still inconsistencies which could have a significant impact on decision-making about interventions for children. For example, the indicators of physical abuse required to trigger a s.47 Inquiry appear to be more severe in some local authority areas than others. This is reflected in the fact that references at level D described varying degrees of severity or risk, with 12 documents making category 3 references and 25 making category 5 references. This observation is illustrated in more detail in Figure 7, below, which shows indicators set out in four different local threshold documents.

Figure 7: Differing thresholds for child protection proceedings in relation to physical abuse – examples from four LSCB threshold documents

<i>Lower thresholds</i>	<i>Higher thresholds</i>
<p>Local authority area 1: Deliberately physically hurting a child. Children with frequent injuries; parental/sibling disclosure of FGM within the family Children with unexplained or unusual fractures or broken bones/burns or scalds/bruises or cuts/bite marks Indicators and concerns of forced marriage/honour based violence/female genital mutilation (FGM) that requires further assessment and parental/sibling disclosure of FGM within the family</p>	<p>Local authority area 3: Clear allegation of harm and/or disclosure of harm Suffering or at risk of suffering serious physical, emotional or sexual harm or neglect Parents have seriously abused/neglected the child Family life is chaotic and there is significant and persistent parental or carer discord /domestic abuse/ honour based violence / forced marriage</p>
<p>Local authority area 2: Physical injury which may be from one single serious injury or a pattern of sustained injuries</p>	<p>Local authority area 4: Parents have seriously abused or neglected the child/young person</p>

The threshold documents for local authority areas 1 and 2 appeared to describe lower thresholds than those for local authority areas 3 and 4. In local authority areas 1 and 2, indicators described physical injury without requiring judgement on the cause of the injury or any criteria regarding severity. This contrasts with local authorities 3 and 4, which clearly described what is meant by abuse and neglect, including clear allegations or disclosure of harm or 'persistent... honour based violence'.

4. Conclusions

For the purposes of the APPC's Inquiry we concluded from this analysis that although there is a degree of alignment between threshold documents, there are also examples of variation. Such examples were particularly notable the issues of domestic violence, self-harm, housing and bullying. The documents prescribe different levels of intervention or support for children with very similar needs, or who are facing very similar risks. Taken alongside other evidence collected for the inquiry, particularly in relation to a lack of availability of early help services and the impact of funding on decisions, this raises concerns that some children may not be getting the support that they need.

There is significant potential to develop this research further. This might include, for example, looking at the extent to which some documents describe higher or lower threshold across the board (rather than for specific issues in isolation) and comparing the styles, clarity and quality of documents. This could be complemented with additional evidence from local areas. For example, the relationships between the content of threshold documents, how they are used in their particular local area, services available and demographic factors could be explored. The findings of the APPGC's Inquiry and ongoing reform of local multi-agency safeguarding arrangements provide both impetus and opportunities implement any lessons for practice which could be identified.

Appendix 1: Search terms

Domestic violence	<p>Specific terms: Dv, family breakdown, divorce, separation</p> <p>Phrases abuse/aggression/controlling/dispute/conflict/relationship/violence(stress)/stress <i>with</i> Family/domestic/in the home/between parents</p>
Physical abuse	<p>Specific terms bruise, mark(s), fracture, burns</p> <p>Phrases injury, physical, punishment, violence, A&E attendance <i>with</i> unexplained, concern, abuse, crime, offence</p> <p><i>Or</i></p> <p>Honour <i>With</i> Crime, violence</p>
Bullying	<p>Specific terms Bull(ying/ied), discrimination, victimisation</p> <p>Phrases Violence <i>with</i> peer(s), on grounds of/based on</p>
Self harm	<p>Specific terms Suicid(e/al)</p> <p>Phrases Self , own <i>with</i> harm(ing), risk(ing), injury, inflicted, induced, attempt</p>
Housing problems	<p>Specific terms Housing, accommodation, physical environment, fuel, homeless(nes), transient</p> <p>Phrases Home <i>With</i> (dis)repair, hazard, danger</p>

Appendix 2: Coding guide

	Severity codes	Examples	General notes
1	Challenging situations (for the child), additional needs or, a risk of situation(s) which may prevent a child from achieving or maintaining a reasonable level of development	Acrimonious divorce/separation	?Is it vague? – - If more than one severity level is described within the same sentence/reference (e.g. current or past abuse)– code it at the highest relevant level. - If a broad term is used (like 'housing issues') make a balanced interpretation – for this example in the pilot we assumed it was somewhere in between not being able get a mortgage and not being homeless – not at either extreme. - In either case add the 'V' for vague tab in the next column
2	An ongoing situation which may prevent a child from achieving or maintaining a reasonable standard of development, or risk of situations which may cause significant harm	Transient families; An A&E attendance giving cause for concern Parent's relationship is in conflict and impacting on the children Vulnerable to bullying/bullies others	
3	An ongoing situation which means the child is unlikely to achieve or maintain as reasonable standard of health and development; established instances of situations which may cause significant harm, or a risk of situations which will cause significant harm	A person who has a conviction for offences against children (sexual, physical or neglect) and poses a potential risk Family characterised by conflict and serious chronic relationship problems Victimisation of family in their local area//Severe bullying of others//Is subject to discrimination, e.g. racial, sexual or due to disabilities;// Concerns about possible bullying/ Low level self-harm. Statutorily overcrowded [] accommodation// Property in significant state of disrepair which present dangers to family members and landlord not engaging	May or will ? – if the document is explicit regarding the child being harmed or impacted it is always 'will' – in other instances it is more subjective – please see examples in next column Established instances – i.e. stated that one or two such events have happened or concrete/clear evidence of such.
4	Repeated instances of situations which may cause significant harm, established situations which will cause significant harm, or risk of situations which could be immediately life threatening, risk of a crime being committed against a child	Allegation or reasonable suspicion of serious injury or abuse// Crime or incident which has or may have been committed to protect or defend the honour of the family or community (honour based violence) Persistent exposure to violent behaviours within the home Experiences bullying; Self harming and/or suicidal thoughts Housing accommodation places child / young person in danger / at risk of harm// Homeless 16/17 year olds	Risk – also includes 'suspicion' and suggestion that something 'may' be happening - only includes significant risk or suspicion not remote possibilities -also includes 'past' or 'history of' as implication is that the episode referred to is over but there is a risk of relapse/repeat
5	Repeated instances of situations which will cause significant harm, established instances of situations which could be immediately life-threatening or a crime being committed against the child	Child is subject to physical abuse Severe and/or frequent domestic abuse Subject to severe bullying/subject to violence on grounds of race, disability etc Endangers own life through self harm//Self-harming or suicide attempts	Crime – in this instance means where a custodial sentence may be likely – i.e. rape, extreme/persistent abuse/violence or premeditated acts of violence. Although technically a crime, only some child abuse and neglect would count
6	Repeated life threatening situations or crimes committed against the child		Repeated – includes use of the present tense which suggest an ongoing behaviour/experience