

Safeguarding Blog:

How the Soham Murders reshaped Safer Recruitment

Recent media coverage about the death of Ian Huntley earlier this month has brought the Soham case back into our minds. This week's blog reflects on the murders of Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells, and why the learning that followed continues to shape safer recruitment and safeguarding practice in schools today. Read on to see how the Bichard Inquiry changed recruitment across our partnership, how the case shaped services responsibilities, the role of leadership and governance and the Top Tips for Best Safeguarding Practice.

This year marks twenty-five years since the murders of Jessica Chapman and Holly Wells in Soham. Their deaths remain one of the most significant moments in the history of safeguarding in England, not only because of the tragedy itself, but because of what it revealed about how adults were recruited into roles working with children.

Safer recruitment procedures in schools and other services (ie Children's Social Care) have been profoundly shaped by the learning that followed. The changes were not about a single individual, but about strengthening the systems that exist to protect children and ensuring schools understand their role within those systems.

The Bichard Inquiry and the birth of safer recruitment as we know it

The [Bichard Inquiry Report](#) fundamentally changed recruitment for roles working with children. It exposed serious weaknesses in how information about individuals was recorded, retained, shared, and acted upon in the Soham case. Concerns that, in isolation, may have appeared low-level or historic were never brought together, meaning risk was not properly identified or assessed. For education settings, the Inquiry made one thing clear: recruitment decisions are safeguarding decisions.

What followed was a move away from informal, inconsistent recruitment practice towards a framework that requires schools to be:

- rigorous in checking suitability
- systematic in recording information
- accountable for decisions made
- professionally curious where information raised questions.

The Inquiry laid the foundations for not simply a set of checks, but a strengthened safeguarding mindset applied throughout the recruitment process.

How Soham shaped safer recruitment responsibilities

Many of the expectations placed on agencies today can be directly traced back to the learning from Soham. Enhanced DBS checks, barred list checks, regulated activity definitions, and clearer guidance on information sharing were all introduced to prevent fragmented knowledge and poor decision-making. Importantly, the Inquiry challenged schools to move beyond a tick box model of recruitment and that

robust safeguarding cannot rely solely on whether a check has been completed, but on how information is understood, considered, and followed up.

For schools, this means safer recruitment is about:

- scrutinising application histories and gaps in employment
- seeking and questioning references, not simply receiving them
- exploring concerns rather than explaining them away
- recognising patterns, not dismissing issues as isolated incidents and
- maintaining a live Single Central Record for all staff – a safeguard developed in response to the learning from Soham.

These principles remain at the heart of safeguarding and statutory guidance today.

Safer recruitment today: continuing the legacy in practice

Safer recruitment places clear responsibilities on agencies, schools and governors – all are expected to apply professional judgement and curiosity, even when this may cause delay. The legacy of Jessica and Holly reminds us that safeguarding must be vigorous and thorough, and never be rushed for convenience.

The role of leadership and governance

Another key learning from the Inquiry was the importance of clear accountability. Across the partnership today, safer recruitment is not just the responsibility of one individual. Leaders and governors have a duty to ensure:

- safer recruitment practice is understood and embedded
- those involved are appropriately trained
- records are accurate and scrutinised
- concerns are escalated in a timely way, and not minimised.

The message from Soham is simple: safeguarding works best when good systems are backed by strong leadership and sound professional judgement.

Why this reflection still matters for the partnership

The Bichard Inquiry exposed failures across policing, education and children's services, leading to national reform. Every recruitment decision must reflect that learning. Twenty-five years on, we carry the responsibility to uphold vigilance, professional curiosity and an unwavering commitment to children's safety when they are planning a recruitment exercise.

Top Tips for Best Safeguarding Practice

1. Treat every recruitment decision as a safeguarding decision

Safer recruitment is not an administrative hurdle at the end of a process. Even before a vacancy is identified, schools should be thinking about risk, suitability, and the responsibility that comes with employing someone to work with children.

2. Never rely on checks alone

DBS and barred list checks are essential, but they are only part of the picture. Safer recruitment is about how information is interpreted, connected, and followed up.

3. Be professionally curious, especially when something doesn't sit comfortably

Gaps in employment, vague references, changes in job history, or inconsistent explanations should prompt further questions. Curiosity is not suspicion, it is a safeguarding responsibility.

4. Scrutinise references, don't just receive them

References should be read carefully and followed up where they are brief, unclear, or overly generic. If something is missing or feels minimised, schools should seek clarification before proceeding.

5. Look for patterns, not isolated issues

The Bichard Inquiry showed the danger of viewing concerns in isolation. Those recruiting should consider how information fits together over time and across roles, rather than dismissing issues as one-off or historic.

6. Ensure at least one trained safer recruitment panel member is actively involved

No interview panel to appoint staff should be convened without at least one member being properly trained; further ensuring that trained staff are meaningfully involved in shortlisting, interviewing, and decision-making.

7. Keep accurate, clear and contemporaneous records

Recruitment decisions should be properly documented, including how concerns were explored and resolved. Good records protect children, services, and staff by showing how safeguarding judgement was applied.

8. Don't rush recruitment because of pressure

Staffing shortages and operational pressures are real, but safeguarding must never be compromised for convenience. Delaying an appointment is always preferable to making a decision that has not been properly tested.

9. Share responsibility at leadership and governance level

Safer recruitment is not the job of one person. Leaders and governors should have oversight of practice, understand their statutory responsibilities, and provide appropriate challenge where needed.

10. Remember why safer recruitment exists

Safer recruitment is rooted in learning from tragedy so it is important we keep the focus on children by using rigorous systems to prevent opportunities for unsuitable people to work with children.