

# Messages from case reviews

Executive Summary

A review of case reviews and  
audits undertaken by the  
CYSCB 2007 – 2013



## Introduction

Serious case reviews were originally conceived in the 1991 version of Working Together to Safeguard Children under the Children Act 1989. In 2006 serious case reviews became a statutory function of Local Safeguarding Children Boards.

Alongside serious case reviews the CYSCB reviews cases which fall short of the statutory criteria where it is felt that lessons can be learnt.

Serious Case Review	SCR	Statutory review undertaken when a child dies or where a child has been seriously harmed and where there are concerns regarding the way in which agencies worked together.
Learning Lessons Review	LLR	A review undertaken when a child has been harmed and where there are concerns regarding the way in which agencies worked together.
Single Agency Review	SAR	A review undertaken by a single agency when a child has been harmed and where there are concerns regarding the way in which agencies worked together.
Thematic Review		A review undertaken around a theme with the process designed to assist the CYSCB gaining an in depth understanding of an issue.

Since 2007, the CYSCB has undertaken eleven reviews including four serious case reviews, six single agency reviews, one learning lesson review and the thematic review of neglect.

The most commonly findings relate to the quality of assessments with other repeated findings being the:

- Quality of supervision
- Absence of the child's voice
- Practitioner's understanding and knowledge base relating to sexual abuse, domestic abuse and neglect
- Adequacy and usage of Parental Written Agreements

## Messages from reviews

In view of the many local reviews having findings in common, there are inevitably questions raised about the effectiveness of the review process and its impact on practice. Sidebotham (2010, 2012) when looking at the serious case review process optimistically observed that *the fact that some issues come up repeatedly... does not necessarily mean that lessons have*

*not been learnt or that nothing is changing. Some lessons are so important that they need to be re-emphasised and potentially re-learnt as people, organisations and cultures change. We tend to learn best, both as individuals and as teams, when the material we are learning is contemporary and clearly relevant to our local context and circumstances. SCRs provide an opportunity for that, bringing issues powerfully home in a local context and in a way that can directly influence front line workers* (Sidebotham, 2012). The messages from this review suggest otherwise with some key areas of practice appearing resistant to change.

Whilst caution has to be applied to extrapolating broad lessons from a limited number of cases conducted over a six year period the adequacy of assessment has been identified as a significant factor in each review and should not be dismissed especially when viewed alongside other evidence.

In a recent report to the CYSCB stated that case file audits found that assessments *all too often lacking analysis; focussing on the presenting problem without placing the issue within the context of previous involvement or the family's history. Assessments were found to contain detail about the concern although this was often not discrete indicating a lack of clarity regarding the nature of the presenting issue. Consequently, objectives / plans were not grounded in the analysis resulting in plans which were unspecific, lacking measurability and often would be unlikely to bring about sustainable change* (Interim report to the CYSCB, Oct 2013).

These findings are also echoed in a recent study of five serious case reviews undertaken by TriX<sup>1</sup> which found that *while each case has unique features the accounts given by the SCRs have much in common with each other and with the conclusions of the overview studies of SCRs by Marion Brandon et al<sup>2</sup>*. In each case there were weaknesses in:

- *Social work assessments;*
- *Multi agency assessments such as pre-birth assessments;*
- *The child's view and the child's experience were not central to the practice or consideration of the case;*
- *Rules of optimism and tendency to start again with each incident or new engagement with the family applied;*
- *Key information was not shared across the professional network involved with the child and family;*
- *No one had a full picture of all the circumstances of the child and their family*

The fact that the reviews highlight inadequacies in assessments should not be viewed with surprise in view of its importance in determining how cases should be managed. It therefore follows that in the absence of an adequate assessment it is more likely that the case will

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<sup>1</sup> TriX Policy Briefing 99 November 2013

<sup>2</sup> New learning from serious case reviews: a two year report for 2009-2011. Brandon et al Research Report DFE-RR226

lose focus and for mistakes to be made. Conversely, whilst a thorough assessment does not guarantee a positive outcome, the ensuing actions can more easily be understood and justified. Additionally, in cases in which the practitioner has a good understanding of the family based on a thorough assessment, problems are more likely to be recognised and identified at an earlier stage.

Along with assessment, it should also come as no surprise that reviews identify shortfalls in supervision practice as supervision... *enables and supports workers to build effective professional relationships, develop good practice, and exercise both professional judgement and discretion in decision-making.* As such the absence of effective supervision will increase the likelihood of inadequate assessment and, in turn, ineffective decision-making and unfocused interventions. Significantly, the absence of effective supervision and an adequate assessment increases the risk of the child's voice being lost along with the ability of the practitioner to empathise with the child's situation.

Whilst the issue of assessment, supervision and practitioner knowledge base are common features both locally and nationally and can be viewed as intangible, the problems identified in relation to parental written agreements (PRA) are clearly defined by the reviews. A review undertaken in 2007 first identified an overreliance by social workers on PWRs; an observation echoed by subsequent reviews. However, despite the findings of reviews and clear guidance PRAs continue to be used inappropriately with the most recent LLR (EB, 2013) providing evidence of a plan which was overly complex, unrealistic, unverifiable and not underpinned by assessment.

The reviews highlight that, with the exception of one case, one form of abuse typically coexists with other forms of maltreatment with the reviews providing evidence of a clear correlation between different forms of maltreatment. This is particularly the case in relation to neglect and domestic abuse with the thematic review finding that in many cases *there appears not to have been a consideration regarding the correlation between neglect and other types of abuse.*

In relation to domestic abuse research conducted in the United States suggests that in an estimated 30 to 60 percent of the families where either domestic violence or child maltreatment is identified, it is likely that both forms of abuse exist (Appel et al, 1998)<sup>3</sup>. Studies show that for victims who experience severe forms of domestic violence, their children also are in danger of suffering serious physical harm.

In the UK, the NSPCC prevalence study (Radford et al 2011) undertaken with a sample of the general population found that young people experiencing family violence were between 2.9

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<sup>3</sup> Appel, A. E., & Holden, G. W. (1998). Co-occurring spouse and child abuse: Implications for CPS practice. *APSAC Advisor*

and 4.4 times more likely to experience physical violence and neglect from a caregiver than those young people not exposed to family violence<sup>4</sup>.

One in 20 children (4.8%) have experienced contact sexual abuse. Over 90% of children, who experienced sexual abuse, were abused by someone they knew<sup>5</sup>. However, child sexual abuse largely remains hidden with many victims waiting years before telling anyone (Cawson, 2000) with research suggesting that one in three children who have been sexually abused do not report it at the time (Radford et al, 2011).

As such sexual abuse is difficult to identify and requires the practitioner to have a good understanding of the subject and to be aware of the subtle indicators; a message echoed in one review which found that there was a *failure to... identify the potential signs of sexual abuse being exhibited by the children*. The same review also found a *failure to consider the risks posed to the children by the presence in the household of a convicted sex offender*. Responding to suspicions of sexual abuse therefore demands a methodical, sensitive and empathic approach which recognises the difficulty children have in disclosing abuse.

## Messages from audits

Over the past year a number of audits have been undertaken by the CYSCB exploring the impact of the thematic review of neglect on practice.

The findings of audits echo the findings of reviews especially in relation to the adequacy of assessments. Many cases failed to adequately assess the child and family's needs with the main areas of weakness being that the assessments lacked analysis; focussing on the presenting problem without placing the issue within the context of previous involvement or the family's history.

A number of these assessments did not discretely identify the presenting concern indicating a lack of clarity in respect of the presenting issue. These assessments also failed to explore the reasons underpinning the presenting problems or the inconsistent engagement by the families with services. Consequently, plans were not grounded in analysis resulting in plans which were uninformed, and unlikely to bring about sustainable change.

The child's voice and perspective was found to be absent in many of the assessments. Whilst it was evident that the child had been seen and spoken to there was a lack of interpretation by the worker or of asking the question, 'what must life be like for this child living in this situation?'

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<sup>4</sup> Child abuse and neglect in the UK today (Radford et al, NSPCC, 2011)

<sup>5</sup> NSPCC, 2011

Those cases assessed as good were found to clearly identify the problem with one auditor commenting in respect of an assessment rated as good that it *'[detailed] the concern and [placed] it into the broader family context. There are good observations of interactions and there is also good evidence of the child's complex needs'*. Good assessments also contained an analysis of the information placing the presenting concerns within the wider context of the family's functioning and history. One auditor commented that a good assessment provided a *three dimensional view of [the child] dealing with both his presenting problems whilst also giving a good sense of his behaviour's aetiology along with other factors (including family, education, medical and social)*.

Good assessments were also found to clearly articulate and where necessary interpret the child's voice. In respect of one of the cases an auditor observed that *there is a strong sense of the young person; his issues, where he sees himself, his lack of self awareness, motivation to change, his vulnerabilities and where he viewed himself at the time of the assessment, how he views his family and lack of awareness of his actions upon others*. In another it was observed, *'there is some evidence in later reports that work has taken place with the child to ascertain his view and that observations of his behaviour inform actions taken*.

## Lessons from audits

Effective assessments:

- Are continuous and build upon previous assessments including those undertaken by other agencies.
- Clearly and discretely identify the presenting problem.
- Place the presenting problem within the context of the family's history especially where there been previous concerns.
- Respect and draw upon the expertise of other professionals working with the family.
- Include information from other professionals working with the child and family and recognise that other services may have a detailed understanding of the child and family.
- Always considers the parent's capacity and ability to sustain change along with whether parental change is within the child's timescale.
- Provide analysis based on hypotheses which are tested against evidence and observations.
- Includes a synthesis which provides an understanding of the factors underpinning the family's problems.
- Clearly articulate the child's voice which includes interpretation and extends beyond simply recording what the child has said.

- Adopt an empathic approach where the question is always asked 'what must life be like for this child living in this family?'
- Contain objectives which are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely. Importantly, the objectives must be based on evidence contained within the assessment.
- Are reviewed in light of new evidence including the effectiveness of the objectives in bringing about behavioural change.

Effective responses to neglect require:

- An understanding of the chronic, insidious, impact to the child's emotional, developmental and physical wellbeing.
- A clear focus on, and empathy with, the child.
- Early identification.
- Assertive, tenacious interventions.
- An understanding of the psychological and emotional factors which underpin the neglecting parent's behaviours and attitudes.
- An interdisciplinary approach.

## Conclusion

At the heart of any successful intervention is the assessment along with a good understanding of child maltreatment. However, an assessment should not be taken as the existence of a document referred to as an 'assessment'. Rather there should be evidence of an analytical thought process which outlines the problem and hypothesises on the problem's causes. The assessment should also evidence a multiagency/interdisciplinary perception and approach. Importantly, once identified, there should be evidence of clear objectives which (where working in cooperation with parents) have been agreed with the parent for what is required to change.

