



Learning Lessons Practice Briefing Note SCR Family M, April 2018

From the Wiltshire Safeguarding Children Board

Thank you for taking the time to read this briefing sheet. It is one way by which we are supporting multi-agency professionals working with children and young people and their families to learn from practice.

This briefing sheet pulls together key messages arising from a local case review.

We ask that you take time to reflect on these issues and consider, together with your team/s, how you can challenge your own thinking and practice in order to continuously learn and develop and work together to improve outcomes for children and young people. This document includes a feedback sheet to capture how you have used this learning.

What is a Serious Case Review?

A Serious Case Review (SCR) takes place after a child dies or is seriously injured; where abuse or neglect is thought to have been involved and there are concerns about how agencies have worked together. These are locally conducted reviews with the aim of identifying learning to improve practice and the final report is published. More information about Serious Case Reviews can be found on [Working Together](#) and at www.wiltshirescb.org.uk.

Family M Case Review

This review focused on five children: Sibling 1 aged 4, Sibling 2 aged 6, Sibling 3 aged 8, Sibling 4 aged 10 and Sibling 5 aged 12 (all ages at the start of the review period). They were living with their Mother and her partner Mr W, father of 2 of the children. Historically there had been concerns in relation to neglect, emotional abuse and domestic abuse going back a number of years. Mr W was found to have downloaded child sexual abuse images. He was arrested and released on bail conditions not to have unsupervised contact with any child. An initial child protection conference for the children was planned but then cancelled and the case was held at child in need. During this process, there continued to be concerns in relation to neglect, emotional and physical abuse; however there was professional disagreement about and lack of clear analysis of these risks. There were also concerns that bail conditions were not being adhered to by Mr W. Forensic examination of the sexual abuse images evidenced that one of the children had been subject to sexual abuse by Mr W. He was convicted of a number of child sex offences and is now in jail.

The full report can be found here:

<http://www.wiltshirescb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Final-Report-SCR-Family-M.pdf>

Key considerations for practice arising from the review

1. Professionals can feel uncertain about how to respond to the risk from men who view online child sexual abuse images, and as a result this can leave children at continued risk of harm.

Professionals are aware that those who download child sexual abuse images pose significant risks to children, but are often unclear about how to assess the risk these adults pose; how to assess whether another adult/parent is able to protect children and how best to ensure children are not groomed. There has been an exponential increase in the number of men who possess indecent images of children, including images of rape and sexual assault. This is both locally in Wiltshire and nationally. It is clear that the act of downloading and possessing images of children being abused is not a passive activity. Watching children being abused by others is child abuse and should be appropriately challenged.

In this case, whilst awaiting the outcome of the forensic examination of the child sexual abuse images, professionals did not effectively risk assess neither the perpetrator nor Mother's ability to protect, which left the children at risk.

Current debates within the child protection arena have focused on whether downloading abusive images will lead to offenders sexually abusing children. The research is not clear, but work by CEOP suggests that there is a clear correlation between downloading sexual abuse images and sexual offending against children; although a clear causal pathway cannot be established. The research suggests that it is important to assess the risk that each individual poses, with the presumption that each is a potential sexual abuser.

- [Protecting Children from Harm: a critical assessment of child sexual abuse in the family network in England and priorities for action, Summary 2015, Office of the Children's Commissioner](#)
- [Online child sexual abuse images: doing more to tackle demand and supply, NSPCC, 2016](#)
- [A Picture of Abuse: A thematic assessment of the risk of contact child sexual abuse posed by those who possess indecent images of children, CEOP, 2012](#)
- [Finklehor - four preconditions](#)

2. All professionals should feel confident to challenge decision making where they do not feel this is in the best interest of the child.

In this case there were differences of views about the family and Mother's approach that were expressed at the time but never escalated beyond an initial challenge. This meant the children needs were not met and they were left at risk. Lack of professional challenge is a feature of many serious case reviews¹.

Child protection inevitably involves working with uncertainties and making difficult decisions and complex judgements on the basis of incomplete information in rapidly evolving, often hostile and highly stressful contexts. The ease with which different people feel that they can challenge, and/or be challenged, reflects the culture of the organisation and the degree to which the interests of children are at the forefront of multi-agency work. WSCB has an [Escalation Procedure](#), which all professionals should be aware of and confident in using. This is currently being reviewed in order to develop an approach to disagreements that ensures children's needs remain at the heart of all we do.

- 3. Professionals should be alert to uncritically accepting what parents tell them about their children in the mistaken belief that this is “working in partnership”. This can result in an inaccurate description of children’s needs and circumstances which are left unaddressed as a result.**

The Munro Reviewⁱⁱ commented that adults in this situation have a number of motives for not always providing a full picture of their or their children’s circumstances. The task of professionals, where there are concerns about children, is to remain in a position of “respectful uncertainty” and display “healthy scepticism”. This means routinely checking the validity of information provided by parents/adults by cross referencing and triangulating with other sources; testing out the level of parental care and concern for children and the extent to which parents feel a sense of responsibility for their children and their well-being. This did not always happen for the five siblings in this case.

Asking questions and seeking explanation from parents is something to be valued; healthy challenge is good and can provide assurance that your assessment of the situation is accurate. A high reliance by professionals on self-report by parents brings with it significant risks of proceeding on false information. Good information sharing, supervision and open discussion at key decision-making meetings to ‘check and test’ information can be crucial in ensuring this does not happen.

[WSCB Working with difficult and distracting parents Factsheet](#) sets out ways professionals can ensure they remain child focused in their practice.

WSCB is also ...

- **...developing a multi-agency neglect framework and toolkit for practitioners to support them in the effective assessment and response to neglect.** There is significant recognition across practice, policy and research networks of the serious negative impact of long term neglect on children’s wellbeing and outcomes across the developmental lifespan into their future as adults. If there are ineffective identification processes, assessment frameworks, tools and interventions to address neglect, it will not be possible to meet the needs of children in the short or medium term and professionals will not be able to break the long cycle of neglect that is often seen from generation to generation. This was a feature of this case.

There is also evidence of the relationship between neglect and other forms of abuse, including child sexual abuse, as was a feature in this case.

<https://www.rip.org.uk/resources/publications/evidence-scopes/child-neglect-and-its-relationship-to-sexual-harm-and-abuse-responding-effectively-to-childrens-needs-updated>

For further information on neglect, click here [Neglect \(South West Child Protection Procedures\)](#)

- **... conducting a thematic review of the child in need process and will make recommendations for improvement.** The Child in Need process is a core part of the safeguarding continuum. It is essential that the process is effective in order to enable children to be safeguarded, their needs met and outcomes improved.

ⁱ Sidebotham, P., Brandon, M., Bailey, S., Belderson, P., Dodsworth, J., Garstang, J., Harrison, E., Retzer, A. and Sorensen, P. (2016) Pathways to harm, pathways to protection: a triennial analysis of serious case reviews 2011 to 2014: final report. [London]: Department for Education.

ⁱⁱ Munro, E. (2010), The Munro Review of Child Protection – Part One: A Systems Analysis, London: Department for Education.