National Safeguarding Conference

Serious Case Reviews and family placement: Experience repeated or lessons learned?

Alan Wood, Regional Director and Interim Deputy CEO BAAF
23rd October 2013.
Overview:

1. *Where we were:*
   Brighton and Hove/Wakefield SCR

2. *Connections and weak links:*
   Distortion of assessments
   Ages of concern

3. *Where we are:*
   Cheshire East SCR

4. *Summary*
Where we were...?
SCR’s: What have we learnt?.

**Brighton and Hove (2001)**  
John Anthony Smith, died in adopters care, 54 bruises and 3 adult bite marks

**Wakefield (2007)**  
2 male foster carers jailed for sexual offences against children in their care (cared for 18 children in 2 years)
Brighton and Hove: flaws in the assessment

A flawed basis of assessment

Insufficient background information

Inadequately ordered information

Inadequate corroboration
Flaws contd/.

- Crucial information overlooked
- Failure to analyse information
- Possible partiality of referees
- Omission of medical detail
Flaws in the Assessment

- Advocacy style
- Limited supervision
- Poor use of referees
- Compressed interview schedule
- Flawed Assessment: Wakefield SCR
- No analysis
“The fear of discrimination led [the social workers working with the foster carers] to fail to discriminate between the appropriate and the abusive. Discrimination founded on professional judgement on a presenting issue, based on knowledge, assessed evidence and interpretation, is at the heart of good social work practice.” (page 4)

“In our view the panel in striving not to discriminate (in the prejudicial sense), lost its capacity to discriminate (in the analytical sense) and so could not properly exercise its scrutiny role.” (page 54)
Fear of Discrimination (continued)

- In sentencing, QC Cahill emphasised that the case was about a breach of trust, not homosexuality.
- “It was clear that a number of staff were afraid of being thought homophobic. A number of people also, at all levels of practice and management, suggested to us that social work training and ensuring a culture of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice may have ‘blinkered thinking’ so that people failed to think negatively as well as positively.”
Connections and weak links.....
Assessment issues: why assess?

Understand the strengths and weaknesses of the applicant: how suitable?

For couples: understand the stability and permanence of the relationship

How robust is the support network?

Enables the assessor to prepare the Form F/PAR and make a proposal to Panel regarding the applicant’s suitability.

Areas for further development training required

Provide placing authorities and supervising agency with information that is useful in matching
What can distort the assessment?

Applicants:

- May tell assessors ‘what they want to hear’
- Are unlikely to want to ‘fail’
- May be ‘stressed’
- May have had poor experiences of ‘assessment’
- May have something to hide
- May be unsure as to what information is relevant
- May have a partner who does not know ‘everything’ about them
- May be unsure re their commitment
- May not understand what assessors want to know
What can distort the assessment?
Assessors:

- Lack of knowledge/skill
- Lack of time
- Lack of supervision
- Lack of willingness to challenge
- Wanting a ‘positive’ outcome: acting as an advocate for the applicant
- Descriptive not analytical reports
- Pressure regarding recruitment of carers
- Lack of child focus
- Lack of time
### Summary of DfE’s study of SCR recommendations 2009-2010

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Recurring themes within recommendations:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Importance of child focused approach</td>
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<td>taking ‘family’ and ‘environment’ into account</td>
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<td>improve record keeping</td>
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<td>improve information sharing</td>
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<td>Addressing staffing issues</td>
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<td>Training of staff</td>
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- **47 SCR’s between 2009-2010**

Brandon et al 2011 DfE
Ages of Concern: learning lessons from serious case reviews (Ofsted 2011)

- Thematic analysis of 482 SCR’s 2007-2011
- Risk focus upon babies under 1 and children aged 14 +
- 210 were infants under 1 (44.5%)
- 111 were children aged 14 plus (23.5%)
infants less than 1 year old: areas of concern

- Poor pre birth assessments
- Risks relating to parents needs underestimated
- Poor support for young parents
- Role of Fathers marginalized
- Need for improved assessment
- Fragility of infants underestimated
Safeguarding teenagers: Barriers?

- Behaviourally responsible for likelihood of harm
- ‘Risky behaviour = teenage behaviour’
- ‘Symptoms’ misinterpreted or ignored
- Teenagers can take control and fend off abuse
- Increase in age = decrease in harm
- Teenagers viewed as aggressors rather than victims
- Abuse or neglect suffered in adolescence may have originated in early childhood
- Gender issues: externalization and internalization
Khadr, S; Viner, R; Goddard, A. 2011

Health care professional views re ‘child protection’ often age limited

Rates of violent deaths in infants and young children have fallen

Rates of violent deaths for adolescents have remained static

Need for professionals and ‘systems’ to recognize presenting concerns re adolescents are likely to differ from younger children
Young People aged 14 +: areas of concern

- Agency focus upon the Young Person’s challenging behaviour
- Young people treated as adults making choices
- Poor attempts at trying to contextualize behaviour
- Poor co-ordination within assessment and meeting Young People’s Needs
Serious Case Reviews: teenagers, some common themes

- Instability in relation to ‘home’: multiple carers
- Lack of appropriate services earlier in life
- Perception of teenager as ‘troubled and troubling’
- Focus upon behaviours rather than causes of problems
- Focus upon seeking ‘diagnosis’ rather than engagement
- Multiple experiences of multiple abuse
Serious Case Reviews: teenagers, some common themes

Focus upon presenting crisis rather than proactivity

Self harm history and threats of suicide

Long history of multi agency involvement

‘Invisibility’ of the young person

Lack of clarity re plans and services

Lack of communication between agencies

Newcastle SGB 2011; Lancashire SGB 2008; Cornwall SCB 2011
Where we are...
SCR Cheshire East: Brabbs report 2011


Female adopter charged with 88 counts of child cruelty 2009

Male adopter charged with 14 counts 2009

Children subject to frequent episodes of physical abuse; emotional abuse and neglect from the beginning of placement
assessment issues: context

Applicants only started living together full time during assessment period

Impact of work upon availability to keep appointments

Approved for sibling group of 3 as applicants wanted to ‘avoid difficulties they had as only children’

Applicants had ‘no experience of children’
Concerns: assessment

- Too reliant on self assessment
- ‘over positive tone’ of assessment
- Panel did not probe/challenge enough
- Focus upon resource issue: 3 children could be placed

- Poor analysis
- Focus upon meeting the applicants needs and ‘getting them through the process’
Concerns: placement

- Insufficient focus upon each child’s needs
- Focus upon placing together in rare resource
- Introductions too hasty, not child focused and not evaluated
- Timescales driven by applicants needs
## Concerns: relationships

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<th>Concerns</th>
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<td>Attachment issues child C and female applicant</td>
<td>Both Adult’s unrealistic expectations of children</td>
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<td>Male applicant ‘opting out’ of parenting</td>
<td>Existing issues in relationship of all three children</td>
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<td>Applicants hostility towards Social Workers</td>
<td>Applicants rejection of advice</td>
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<td>Applicants ambivalence: delay in court application</td>
<td>Interaction between disguised compliance/professional status/class/education level of applicants</td>
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Concerns: supervision

- Supervision during placement was inadequate
- Poor child focus
- Too few visits
- Insufficient observation of applicants with children
- Social workers did not follow up concerns
- Reviews not robust: final review cancelled: application lodged.
- Children lost within the system and process
Concerns: child protection

- 10 opportunities missed to investigate child abuse
- 10 allegations made by children: 3 investigated.
- Child B’s disclosures and associated behaviour linked with ‘teenage behaviour’ e.g. running away/aggression
- Lack of understanding of sources of ‘behaviour’
- Disguised compliance by both adults: agency response to adults needs
- Children lost all confidence in adults ability to protect them from harm: action taken to protect after 10 years of abuse.
Concerns: assessments, the wider context

- Level of understanding of universal service professionals for initiating action to protect
- Up to date chronologies
- Examination of professional instinct in relation to evidence
- Use of the assessment framework to gather and analyse style of parenting in particular, i.e. authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and neglectful
Summary 1:

An underpinning commitment to evidence and analysis is essential to high quality assessment practice.
Summary 2:

Advocacy-style reports, though tempting and often rewarded by panels, applicants and agencies, will only work *most* of the time.....
Summary 3:

Fostering and Adoption Assessments are Risk Assessments