Child Safeguarding Practice Review
Learning Brief: Aisha & Ciara

Case Background

Aisha and Ciara's mother was struggling to cope with looking after two young children. There were early signs of neglect and a poor understanding of the children's emotional needs; mother was a victim of domestic abuse from her new partner and there were conflicts with the extended family.

A Child in Need plan was instigated but there was some professional disagreement when it ceased about whether there was sufficient progress and improvement in Mother's care of the children. Subsequent concerns were raised about two males providing care to Aisha and Ciara and Mother was asked to ensure they were not allowed in the home.

Aisha and Ciara became subject to a further Child in Need plan when it became known that one of these males had been assessed as posing a high risk of sexual abuse towards young children.

Six months later the children were made subject to a Child Protection Plan due to deteriorating home conditions, and two months later evidence was found which confirmed that one of the males had sexually abused the children. Extensive police inquiries were undertaken, followed by a successful prosecution against the perpetrator which led to a lengthy prison sentence for child sexual offences.

Mother, maternal grandparents and father all contributed to this review. We are grateful for their openness and willingness to be involved, and their views are incorporated into the report. It is important to reiterate that the responsibility for the harm lies with the perpetrator.

Learning Points/Findings

The importance of establishing and understanding learning needs/borderline learning difficulties

- Good assessment and understanding can provide a strength-based approach to differing cognitive styles and reasonable adjustments must be made.
- Professionals need to think about communication, verbal and nonverbal, written information and how to explain complex and abstract concepts. Professionals must check that the information/request/purpose of a meeting is understood, otherwise progress cannot be made.
- Professionals recognise the complexity of working with parents with a learning disability but identified barriers to effective practice as a lack of confidence, skill, and knowledge.

A structured approach to child neglect

- A more structured approach to working with neglect is required, highlighted by the inconsistency in the professional response, caused by different values and understanding of what constituted the neglect of children. In this case the neglect went beyond the physical environment and how the children were physically cared for, to include the suitability of supervisory arrangements and understanding the children's behaviour and the purpose of professional intervention.
- There was professional agreement that the child in need process was not well understood by parents and that they often felt out of their depth and isolated in these meetings. This was in comparison to child protection processes where it is a clear role of the chair to explain the process to adults and children.

Working effectively to address child sexual abuse

- Professionals agreed that working with child sexual abuse was not a routine part of their work; it felt overwhelming, complex and they lacked both skills and knowledge in this area. Awareness raising training, information about signs and indicators and how to talk to children about concerns is required to enhance skills in this area.

Learning: Positive Practice

- Aisha and Cara's Nursery adapted their approach to communicating with mother, consistently checking that she had understood what was being said and taking their meetings with her at her own pace; this was also true of the school and those offering parenting support and support to enable Aisha and Cara to communicate more effectively.
- When concerns regarding the perpetrator's behaviour were highlighted in a community setting that he was attending, steps were taken to address this. It is good practice that this led to his social worker seeking an assessment of him, which was appropriately shared and ensuring that police action was taken.
- Extensive police inquiries were undertaken, leading to a successful prosecution and a lengthy prison sentence.

Learning (continued)

The importance of Child Focused Practice

- Aisha and Ciara were both young and they had limited verbal skills. It is notable that in most of the assessments and child in need process their views were not sought or addressed and their lived experience not clearly outlined. This was despite there being significant knowledge about their circumstances.
- There was recognition that there had been a lack of understanding across the professional network about those professionals who were routinely communicating with Aisha and Ciara and that their expertise could have been called upon. It was agreed that there needed to be more discussion in a multi-agency context of the team around a child about how communication with a child could be facilitated, considering issues of disability, age, and language.
- Professionals highlighted the need for more training about communicating with children who have different communication styles and who are young.

Recognising and acting upon "gut" feelings

- Many of those professionals were concerned about the males in the household and how they behaved around mother, Aisha, and Ciara as well as other parents. They shared this with other professionals but there remained uncertainty about whether this was legitimate information and what weight they should apply to it.
- Making professional judgements and decisions about the needs and circumstances of children/young people in a safeguarding context is complex. Professionals in their work need to balance intuitive reasoning (gut feelings, practice wisdom, emotional responses) with analytical reasoning (formal processes, research findings, guidance, hard facts).
- Professionals felt there needed to be clearer guidance to them about providing professional opinions about children and families, and there was a clear sense of the importance of the role and expertise. There was agreement that all professionals needed to move beyond "flat information sharing" to providing meaning based on their expertise and understanding.

Practitioner Questions and Information

- The Centre for Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse has an extensive range of support tools for practitioners, including a signs and indictors template, a guide for supporting parents and carers, a communicating with children guide and a 12 part film series - Practice improvement - CSA Centre
- Escalation is a positive response to an unresolved issue, and part of day-to-day practice - look at the BWSCP website for more information on our revised escalation guidance - BWSCP Escalation Information.
- Do you feel comfortable sharing children's information? We have a protocol that explains more - BWSCP Information Sharing.
- Do you know where to find your local thresholds of need document? This is vital in enabling you to understand what support may be available for a child and their family - BWSCP Threshold Guidance.
- Have you seen our briefing note on the voice and experience of the child? BWSCP Briefing Note. A range of information from previous Case Review learning is available on our website - BWSCP - Case Review Learning.

Recommendations for the Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership

A series of recommendations have been made, closely linked to the learning points above. These include:

- BWSCP to convene a multi-agency neglect working group which will look at developing a position statement and reviewing tools and frameworks for a structured approach to neglect
- BWSCP to produce local information, support and guidance to remind practitioners that all contact with families where there are potential/additional learning needs, that all verbal or written communication is adapted to ensure they are accessible.
- BWSCP will produce good practice guidance which will facilitate effective multi-agency involvement in Child in Need meetings.
- BWSCP will share the best practice resources being developed by the Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse across the safeguarding network.
- Wokingham Children's Services to review the use of working agreements in terms of appropriateness, ability to keep children safe and understandability for families.

Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership
Reading | West Berkshire | Wokingham

Follow us for up to date safeguarding advice and guidance:

Twitter – https://twitter.com/BWSCP1
Facebook – https://www.facebook.com/BWSafeguardingChildrenPartnership/
Website – www.berkshirewestsafeguardingchildrenpartnership.org.uk
Berkshire Child Protection Procedures - http://proceduresonline.com/berks/