



**Serious Case Review
Allegations against Foster Carers and Abuse of Children in Care**

Learning and Improvement Report

September 2018

Introduction

In February 2012, a police investigation resulted in a male foster carer being convicted of 18 offences of historical sexual abuse. He had been a registered foster carer from the early 1970's until 2003 and fostered children for Hampshire County Council until 1997 and after that date for the newly formed Southampton City Council.

As a result of this conviction, in March 2012 Southampton Safeguarding Children Board serious case review committee commissioned a partnership review, focusing on the work of Police and Children's Services in order to understand the circumstances that had resulted in children in care being sexually abused by this foster carer.

Following consideration of the issues arising from the partnership review, the chair of Southampton Safeguarding Children Board decided on 26th November 2013 that the case met the criteria for a serious case review as set out in Regulation 5 of the Local Safeguarding Children Boards Regulations 2006. The reason for this decision was the children had been seriously harmed and there were concerns as to the way in which the authority, their Board partners or other relevant persons had worked together to safeguard the children concerned.

At the point that a decision was made to conduct a serious case review, it was also known that in September 2013, a female had disclosed that her uncle had indecently assaulted her when she was 13 and 15 years of age. It was identified that the uncle had been a foster carer for Southampton City Council between 1994 and 2008. These allegations were being investigated by Hampshire Police.

The review therefore became a thematic review into allegations against foster carers, however it was halted by an ongoing criminal investigation. Once this was complete, the LSCB was able to carry out the full Serious Case Review.

Although this report is based on historic cases, it also aims to encompass more recent learning and seek assurance that this could not happen today.

The SCR report has required local services to examine their own practice with regard to children in care and to offer assurance to the LSCB around the key issues highlighted in the recommendations.

The Chair of the LSCB is confident that while more work needs to be done, a great deal of progress has already been made to address the gaps identified. This report summarises the learning and improvement actions agreed by the Board and its partner agencies to further strengthen our procedures, knowledge and skills.

Format of the Serious Case Review

Once the Serious Case Review was given approval to continue in 2016, Southampton LSCB appointed Brian Boxall as Independent Chair and Jane Wonnacott as Independent Author.

A multi-agency panel was convened and they met nine times between 2016 and 2018. After reviewing information gathered by the panel, feedback from professionals and young people and a discussion with one victim, the author finalised her report. This highlights key findings and identifies a set of recommended changes to policy and practice to ensure similar cases are prevented in future.

Below is a summary of agreed recommendations and the multi-agency initial response to these. Ongoing monitoring of actions will take place through the Local Safeguarding Children Board's Serious Case Review Group.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Theme: Whole Family

Recommendations:

- Hampshire and Southampton Children's Services should consider the most effective way to maintain a whole family approach for children in foster care which includes joint working between the social worker for the carers and the social worker for the child. Consideration should be given to arrangements for joint supervision of social workers where a child is in a long-term foster placement.
- Southampton Children's Services should provide evidence to the Safeguarding Children Board that the newly developed approach to involving men/ partners in foster care is effectively implemented, in order to ensure that, as a minimum, all members of the family are involved in household reviews.

Changes made or actions to be taken:

- Southampton Children's Services have assured the Board that the whole family is included when foster carers are reviewed annually.
- The Children are expected to be seen and their feedback is included in the report.
- The Fostering Service team and the Protection and Court teams are co-located and regularly meet. This enables a regular interface.
- Foster carers who are in Southampton but look after children from out of area are included in this reviewing process.
- There is ongoing discussion about the provision of a joint supervision opportunities for the Social Workers of the foster carers and those of the children. This may be accessible as part of a reflective supervision offer. The Board will monitor this and ensure that this action is completed.
- Foster Carers receive supervision every six weeks, unless a longer period is agreed at the LAC review meeting. This can be evidenced through their files and records. The expectation is that partners are seen every twelve weeks.

- There is an expectation that men/partners attend the annual review.
- The Fostering Service is considering improvements to their use of multimedia platforms to ensure a discussion with men/partners when they cannot be physically present. E.g. use of skype.
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- If social workers are unable to speak with men/partners then this will be escalated internally and follow up action would ensue.
- Hampshire has a clear policy that the whole family is considered in fostering from the point of assessment onwards. There are set expectations that the partners in fostering are seen every other supervision session and birth children on a quarterly basis. Foster carers in Hampshire receive supervision on a six weekly basis.
- Hampshire's Fostering Service and Children's Social Workers liaise regularly and visit jointly where needed. This is being further developed through Hampshire's transformation work and in conjunction with Hampshire Fostering Network, the independent association for Hampshire Foster Carers. For long term placements, a one worker model is being explored.

Theme: Staff, Supervision and the Voice of the Child

Recommendations:

- Southampton LSCB should ask Southampton children's social care to provide evidence that the system in place for assuring the quality of foster care practice is focused on the needs of the child and that social workers are equipped with the skills, support and supervision to enable them to challenge poor practice.
- All partner agencies should provide Southampton and Hampshire Safeguarding Children Board with evidence that staff working day to day with children in care have knowledge and skills to understand the meaning of children's behaviour and recognise when this may be communicating distress or information about abuse.

- Southampton LSCB should ask children's social care to provide evidence that social workers and relevant others are spending time with children in care both inside and outside the foster home in order to provide sufficient opportunities for effective communication.

Changes made or actions to be taken:

- Southampton Children and Families Service have a quality assurance process which includes monthly auditing by all managers. These audits review professional practice in addition to ensuring the voice of the child is always being taken in to account.
- The Foster Carer Panel see Foster Carer Reviews every three years. The review process can be brought forward if there is need for an extra eye or if any questions have been raised regarding the carers.
- The Corporate Parenting Board produce an annual report and this is shared with the LSCB annually. Any practice issues can be highlighted through this route.
- Case recording and Foster Carer records provide evidence that children are being seen both inside and outside of the home. Internal audits also demonstrate this.
- A 'Bright Spots' survey has recently been completed by Looked after Children in the City. Feedback demonstrates that children feel they have sufficient opportunities for communication.
- There is support in place for Looked after Children, through their Education setting. This is part of the Personal Education Plan (PEP) Process. 97% of 11-18 year olds reported that their carer's showed an interest in what they were doing at school or college.
- This recommendation will be shared with The Corporate Parenting Board for further discussion.
- The LSCB will continue to offer multi-agency training on Missing, Exploited and Trafficking (MET), including spotting the signs and working with children missing from care.

Theme: Practice and Procedure

Recommendations:

- Southampton LSCB should ensure that a system is in place for GPs to be made aware when a Foster Carer is approved. They should also seek assurance that any health concerns that may impact on a patient's capacity to foster are shared with Children's Services.
- Hampshire Safeguarding Children Board should ask children's social care to provide information regarding actions taken as a result of their foster care audit activity and the impact of these actions on practice.
- Southampton LSCB should require children's social care to provide a summary report on the findings of all recent audit and quality assurance activity relating to children in foster care and include progress against actions identified.
- Southampton LSCB should seek assurance that children in care are not disadvantaged where an allegation is made regarding potential abuse. The process of investigation should be the same as for all children.

Changes made or actions to be taken:

- Southampton CCG have consulted with GPs in the City regarding the template of this letter and have suggested a version to Children and Families Service.
- This letter will be sent to GPs for full approvals of mainstream or family and friends carers.
- Hampshire Local Safeguarding Children Board are due to review the findings of the Foster Carer audit at their next Learning and Inquiry Group meeting. This audit considered the safeguarding issues that arose from the investigations and audited all foster carers who were approved prior to 1991 (the scope of the historical abuse investigations) and then post 2011 (to measure against today's regulations). All recommendations have now been completed and these will also be shared at the meeting.
- GP records for existing carers will be updated during the carer review process.

- Hampshire Local Safeguarding Children Board are due to review the findings of the Foster Carer audit at their next Learning and Inquiry Group meeting.
- The Southampton LSCB Serious Case Review Group will review the findings from the recent Foster Carer Audit activity and ensure that any actions are taken forward as appropriate.
- Southampton LSCB have been assured that the process now in place ensures that children in care are not placed at a disadvantage. A referral would be made to MASH in the case of any disclosure or allegation and usual procedure would follow.

Theme: National Issues

Recommendations:

- Southampton LSCB should bring to the attention of the Department for Education the apparent gap in the system whereby concerns regarding the behaviour of a foster carers is made available should they wish to work with children in a paid or voluntary capacity.
- Southampton LSCB should bring to the attention of the Department for Education and the Department of Health the lack of a national policy regarding the provision of health checks for children in care placed away from home.

Changes made or actions to be taken:

- The Chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board has written to the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care regarding the issues above. Any feedback will be discussed at the Serious Case Review Group and progressed as appropriate.