

7 POINT BRIEFING

1

SUMMARY

Wakefield Safeguarding Children Partnership (WSCP) undertook a Learning Circle concerning an infant child following a disclosure from their grandfather they had been concealed from services since their birth. The child's mother confirmed to Children's Social Care (CSC) the child was hers and she had hidden them from services.

The areas the review identified included the following:

1. Use of history, professional curiosity, and accumulation of concerns to challenge parental testimonies
2. How robust concerns from 'non-safeguarding' practitioners and lay persons were acted upon
3. Effectiveness of antenatal processes
4. Use of the child's voice and non-verbal cues as means to understand their lived experience at home
5. Parental relationship and absence of father from service records

2

WHO WAS THE CHILD AND THEIR FAMILY?

The child at the time of their discovery to services was of infant age who has 5 older siblings. They lived with their siblings, along with their mother. The child's father is believed to be the purported father to all 6 children and lives out of area. The family were first known to services in Wakefield in 2013, where they moved to the district. At the time, the 3 eldest children were on a child protection plan for neglect. In addition, there were concerns for the mental health for mother and father, domestic abuse within their relationship and parental drug and alcohol use. Since this period there have been several contacts concerning the family in relation to significant neglect.

3

SUMMARY OF THE INCIDENT

The children (believed initially to have been 5 children) were on Child Protection (CP) Plans and in Public Law Outline (PLO) due to neglect. Social workers visited maternal grandfather to complete a viability assessment as part of the PLO and grandfather disclosed that mother has a 6th child who has been concealed from services.

This was addressed immediately with the children's mother who denied this initially, but subsequently confirmed that she has a child of infant age who has not been registered and is not known to or been seen by professionals for the duration of their life.

The child was seen by health professionals, where there were no immediate health concerns and appeared fit and healthy. When professionals visited, mother either asked a family member to look after the child, or when unannounced made a hidden space in the home, which was made to feel like a 'den' and the child has gone in there, with a tablet or sibling to keep them company. The child has been visible amongst family and appeared to have had a family life.

4

KEY POINTS AND ANALYSIS FROM THE REVIEW

1. Use of history, professional curiosity, and accumulation of concerns to challenge parental testimonies

- There were previous concealed pregnancies and service assessments at the time suggested should mother become pregnant again she may seek to conceal. At the time when mother would have been pregnant, there were some suspicions from professionals at the time mother may be pregnant. Despite this information known, it was not used to counteract mother's denials that she was pregnant when asked
- There were examples where mother did not seek medical care more widely for the children. One of the child's siblings was involved in a road traffic collision which did not result in a follow up, immunisation appointments were missed, some of the children were never taken to the dentist. In relation to school, a similar trend was present, whereby all children had poor levels of attendance and establishing contact with mother was always difficult. These concerns when factored alongside the historical concealment of pregnancies provided a wider context as to maintain the level of avoidance to services
- Services reflected upon the number of references to a 6th child within their service records around the time of the child's birth. Contacts from the landlord in respect of concerns mother was pregnant were referenced and the appropriate questions were asked to mother. With hindsight, where there were limitations was following up on the 'gut feel' which practitioners had that something was not right within the family household and having the tenacity to continue to probe
- Being professionally curious and challenging in the face of parental resistance and dishonesty can be a complex and difficult approach to maintain. It can lead to confrontation from parents and complaints. It was recognised that there is a need for an authorising culture at a senior level in services which not only promotes professional curiosity and challenge, but demands this approach and provides a safe and nurturing environment for practitioners to feel confident to undertake this without a sense of potentially being undermined or reprimanded should there be occasions where curiosity and challenging is misdirected when the intentions have a strong rationale
- There were several reflections from services of specific conversations, observations, and sightings they had of the child when he was with mother which would have benefitted with more robust follow up

2. How robust concerns from ‘non-safeguarding’ practitioners and lay persons were acted upon

- Around the period the child was born, a private landlord made contact with services to raise a concern that mother was pregnant. There was limited evidence recorded to demonstrate how these concerns were followed up robustly
- Systems and practice in Wakefield have significantly developed since this period, however there would be value still in seeking assurance concerns which are raised by ‘non-safeguarding’ practitioners or lay persons are followed up robustly by services. Nationally, this has been recognised as an area of learning in the recent [Child Protection in England review](#)
- Where parental avoidance of services and disguised compliance is present, particularly in the context of neglect, those who are not social workers, health visitors, police officers can be well placed to see how parents and families ordinarily function and capture concerns which may otherwise be not forthcoming
- Maternal grandfather who made the disclosure, could not read or write. As a result, any written information he was in receipt of, which may have highlighted to him that the child was not being referred to would not have registered. This highlighted the importance for all services to factor in any literacy needs of adults, so the approach in sharing information is one which enables them to be fully engaged and able to participate

3. Effectiveness of antenatal processes

- Service records did not suggest that discussions with mother addressing concealed pregnancy on the occasions it occurred with the child’s siblings, nor conversations about contraception had taken place. Wakefield has developed strong systems and practice in recent years regarding pre-birth assessment and Multi-Agency Pregnancy Liaison and Assessment Group (MAPLAG), neither of these aspects were considered in respect of the child, given the circumstances of them not being known as mother’s child
- There is a need to consider further how existing systems, protocols, and guidance could be developed further to strengthen processes in respect of identifying, recording, and assessing to inform effective multi-agency planning of concealed pregnancy

4. Use of the child’s voice and non-verbal cues as means to understand their lived experience at home

- All the child’s siblings were coerced into helping to uphold his concealment. Services maintained a consistent line of sight and contact with the children given the level of concerns in respect of neglect, even during periods of lockdown due to Covid-19
- Service clearly captured and articulated the child’s voice consistently. However, there were limitations in computing what the children were saying alongside elements such as low / non-school attendance, not being brought to appointments, their presentation and in some instances significant sexualised behaviour, which resulted in practitioners being unable to accurately understand the children’s lived experience. Since the children have been outside of mother’s care, it has become clear as to the extent of what their experience was

5. Parental relationship and absence of father from service records

- Within a year of moving to Wakefield, mother and father stated their relationship had ended, with father agreeing there would be no contact due to the risk he posed to mother and the children. When reviewing the chronology, there are references throughout that their relationship was suspected to have had periods of reconciliation, which in part triggered various responses such as stepping the family back to statutory intervention. Father is the purported father to all children, with 3 being born since the family moved to Wakefield, it therefore is reasonable to suspect that mother and father-maintained aspects of their relationship throughout
- Given the length of time the family was subject to service involvement, parents may have become increasingly aware that by informing services that their relationship had ceased would result in statutory intervention ending
- Services need to consider within assessment and safety planning how parents would continue to interact with one another based on their history, whether they were acknowledging father having contact with the children or not bared little relevance when placed within this context

5 WHAT WILL WE DO WITH THESE FINDINGS?

- The full review generated individual, group and system recommendations which are being overseen and implemented by WSCP multi-agency subgroups which are represented by services who work or volunteer with children and families
- WSCP will hold practice review briefings to disseminate the learning and analysis to the children and families workforce

6 NEXT STEPS

- The findings of the review have been approved by WSCP and work is underway in implementing the learning from the incident
- WSCP will consider holding service challenge events for those services involved in the review to report back on how they have implemented recommendations

7 RESOURCES

There are a range of national and local resources, guidance, and training in relation to safeguarding children on the [WSCP Website](#).