

Executive Summary of Serious Case Review

Mr and Mrs B (foster carers)

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1. Circumstances of the Review

This Serious Case Review looks at the circumstances surrounding the case of Mr B following his arrest in 2008 and his subsequent 12 year sentence of imprisonment for offences of a sexual nature involving three female foster children for whom he had cared. Both Mr B and his wife Mrs B, were registered foster carers with Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council.

Mr and Mrs B had been responsible for the care of a total of thirteen children from six families between 1998 and 2008. At the time of Mr B's arrest there were three children in placement with the foster carers. Following Mr B's arrest, it came to light that he had a history of alcohol abuse and was an alleged perpetrator of domestic abuse, although the latter has not been corroborated.

2. Purpose of the Serious Case Review and the Terms of Reference

The Review's purpose is to establish what happened, whether information was shared fully by those professionals involved and procedures were followed appropriately, so that any loop holes can be closed and lessons learned to minimise a possible repeat for another child. This should also reassure the public and prevent the need or demand for further external inquiries. This review was commissioned by Rotherham Safeguarding Children Board in accordance with the Local Safeguarding Children Boards Regulations 2006 and Chapter 8 of "Working Together to Safeguard Children (2006).

The Board agreed the following terms of reference:

- To consider the recruitment, application, training and approval of Mr and Mrs B as foster carers and the support and supervision offered to them during their fostering career.
- To consider the placements of all children placed with Mr and Mrs B including the appropriateness of each placement in relation to the couple's approval category and compliance with the Arrangements for Placement of Children (General) Regulations 1991 (as amended), the Review of Children's Cases Regulations 1991 (as amended) and the Fostering Services Regulations 2002.
- The placement of all thirteen children to be reviewed by all key agencies involved in providing services to the Looked After Children and foster family. Agencies should review the health and well-being of all children during the children's placements and for two months after their placements with Mr and Mrs B ended.
- To examine inter-agency working and communication between the agencies involved, consider whether the decisions and actions taken by the agencies involved were in accordance with policies, procedures and relevant practice standards, make recommendations in respect of any lessons to be drawn from this case and any appropriate action to improve future practice in the light of the review findings and complete their Individual Management Review to the agreed format.

3. The independent overview author:

The author of this Overview Report, Nicole Erlen, is a barrister in independent practice. Prior to transfer to the Bar in 2007 she was a solicitor for 26 years with an established practice acting for local authorities, parents, children and extended family members in care and adoption proceedings. She is co-author of 'Evidence Matters: Social work expertise in the family court' (research in practice 2008). She has conducted family law seminars for the undergraduate family law module at The University of Sheffield and has provided training for social workers, CAFCASS officers, solicitors and barristers. Her appointment is in accordance with the guidance at 8.20 Chapter 8 of 'Working Together to Safeguard Children' as she is independent of all the agencies/professionals involved.

4. The Serious Case Review Panel

The Panel comprised representatives from:

- RMBC Children and Young People's Services (CYPS)
- Rotherham NHS Foundation Trust
- NHS Rotherham
- CAFCASS
- Rotherham, Doncaster and South Humber Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust
- National Probation Service
- South Yorkshire Police.

It was advised by the Rotherham Safeguarding Board Manager. The overview author also attended Panel meetings to help clarify issues and to seek additional information.

The Panel has received and considered Individual Management Reports from:

- CAFCASS
- Rotherham NHS Foundation Trust
- RMBC CYPS Social Care
- RMBC CYPS Inclusion
- RMBC CYPS' Rights2Rights Service
- RMBC CYPS' Get Real Team
- RMBC Neighbourhoods and Adult Services
- NHS Rotherham
- South Yorkshire Police
- Rotherham, Doncaster and South Humber Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust
- Barnardos Yorkshire

5. Family of Mr and Mrs B

Mr and Mrs B are a White British couple with three daughters and four grandchildren.

6. Highlighted issues and learning points

The review highlighted significant learning points for agencies which can be grouped under the following headings:

- 6.1 The recruitment, training, approval and monitoring of the couple as foster carers
- 6.2 The placements of children with the couple and agencies' involvement with those children

6.3 Inter-agency working and communication between professionals.

6.1 The recruitment, training, approval and monitoring of the couple as foster carers

- Mr and Mrs B applied to become foster carers in June 1997 to foster children aged eight to fifteen-years-old. They had three daughters of their own who were all in their twenties and had left the family home. Although the couple used their experience of bringing up their own children in support of their application, neither their children nor their extended family members were interviewed as part of the assessment process. Working practices have now changed to ensure this takes place.
- The couple were approved as carers in June 1998, having already started caring for a sibling group of three children in May 1998 following an emergency approval by Fostering Panel – a practice which is no longer in place.
- Initially Mr B was the main carer whilst Mrs B continued to work. Due to ill health she was off work for a period of time in 1999 and gave up work to become a full-time carer. Both carers experienced significant health problems throughout their time as foster carers. Despite these changes their ability to provide appropriate care was not re-assessed.
- Mr B attended initial training courses and became a trainer himself. Mrs B did not attend training although both attended support groups. In 2006 a foster carer review noted that neither of them had attended training since 2003. This was neither challenged nor action taken to ensure their attendance at training.
- Support for the couple was provided but the policy of six-weekly fostering supervising social worker visits was not applied consistently during their time as carers. There were also periods when there was no allocated social worker for the couple. Although fostering reviews took place, they did not happen annually, as required by regulations, and it is not clear what information was presented to the Fostering Panel following each review.

6.2 The placements of children with the couple and agencies' involvement with those children

- The children placed with Mr and Mrs B were seen to be well cared for and there are examples of children expressing satisfaction with their placement. However there are concerns in relation to:
 - the placement made prior to the carers' receiving foster panel approval
 - two occasions where the couple were caring for more children than the number for which they were approved
 - placing one sibling group in a placement which was not culturally appropriate
 - children not being visited and/or reviewed within statutory timescales
 - children not always being seen alone and their wishes and feelings not being recorded consistently. Had this been done it may have yielded more information for professionals about the care the couple were providing.

Note: These are all practices which no longer occur after earlier reviews of the fostering service.

- Mr B's oppressive parenting style was not challenged sufficiently and resulted in the children's health, educational and (in some cases) emotional needs being compromised.
- There was a lack of monitoring of the children's health needs by the School Nursing Service and Children and Young People's Services did not ensure the children received their

annual Looked After Children's medicals.

- There was poor and inconsistent decision making by Rotherham's Fostering Panel prior to 2002. It is accepted that practice has changed in this area, making the panel's scrutiny more rigorous. This improved approach has been recognised by an inspection visit in January 2009.
- The case highlights strategic difficulties in relation to staffing issues, the identification of culturally appropriate placements and the appointment of independent reviewing officers.

6.3 Inter-agency working and communication between professionals

- Although the couple were viewed by professionals as competent foster carers and children in their care made good progress, there was a lack of scrutiny and challenge of a number of issues that occurred during their time as foster carers. However, there were no signs of sexual abuse or domestic violence.
- Had Fostering Panel been made aware of Mr B's level of alcohol consumption in June 2004 it is expected that the approval of Mr and Mrs B as foster carers would have been suspended pending further investigation. This would not have led to the discovery of sexual abuse or domestic violence but may well have brought to an end Mr and Mrs B's career as foster carers. There is still no corroboration in relation to alleged domestic violence.
- Mr B's GP did not carry out a risk assessment in terms of Mr B's alcohol misuse or refer the issue to Children and Young People's Services. This compromised the safety of the children in the care of the couple.
- There are examples of appropriate referrals made to ensure children were assisted in achieving the best outcomes in respect of their education and emotional well-being. When these were implemented the children appeared to benefit. However, communication between professionals on other issues was compromised by the poor timing of reviews and poor care planning.
- There was also a lack of opportunity for the Looked After Children to express their views away from their home.

7 Recommendations

In addition to individual agencies own internal recommendations, the following recommendations were made by the Serious Case Review Panel and Rotherham Safeguarding Children Board:-

Rotherham Safeguarding Children Board

1. The Chair of Rotherham Safeguarding Board will commission a review, by 31 May 2009, of Appendix 3, South Yorkshire (Rotherham) Child Protection Procedures relating to "protecting children whose parents misuse drugs, alcohol or other substances." The review should include consideration of audit measures to help ensure that proper risk assessments are carried out when potentially hazardous substance misuse is identified in those with parenting and / or parental responsibility.

Rotherham NHS Foundation Hospital Trust

2. The Medical Director of the Trust will write to all referring agencies by 30 April 2009 to reinforce current guidance governing referrals for medical examination in the case of suspected sexual abuse.

NHS Rotherham (Rotherham Primary Care Trust) GP Services

3. The Director of Public Health NHS Rotherham will, by 31 October 2009, commission a review of GP Services to include:
 - A review of the child protection training ensuring that GP's and Practice staff are trained to Level 2 (as outlined in the Intercollegiate Guidance on Child Protection training 2006)
 - Processes for recording the dissemination of Rotherham safeguarding and child protection procedures to GP Practices
 - Monitoring of compliance with procedures
 - Monitoring of attendance at mandatory safeguarding children training
4. The Director of Public Health will write, by 1 April 2009, to the General Medical Council Undergraduate Curriculum Committee to seek that the GMC review the level of child protection training given to medical undergraduates.

Rotherham Primary Care Trust Children and Young People's Services

5. The Head of Children and Young People's Services will recommend to the Head of Locality Services that mechanisms are in place by 30 April 2009 to ensure that the Designated Nurse for Looked After Children is advised of any change of placement within 48 hours.

South Yorkshire Police

6. The Chief Constable should ensure, by 30 September 2009, that officers are aware of their responsibilities in relation to sharing information with partner agencies where appropriate.

CAFCASS

7. The Service Manager, CAFCASS (South Yorkshire) undertake an audit of the practice of CAFCASS officers, by 30 September 2009, in relation to checking that Fostering Regulations and National Minimum Standards are correctly and appropriately applied in relation to looked after children to whom they are appointed.

Rotherham Doncaster and South Humber Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust

8. The Director of the Trust shall ensure, by 30 April 2009, that where a parent/foster carer seeks the termination of a service for a child/young person service user who is looked after or subject to a plan of protection, the clinician shall consult with the consultant psychiatrist with case responsibility, with at least one other professional and, if of an age to give consent, the child, before terminating that service.

RMBC Children and Young People's Services – Social Care

9. The Director of Targeted Services shall, by 30 June 2009, develop a protocol whereby the standard form notifying health professionals of any change of placement shall be completed and dispatched within 48 hours.

10. The Director of Targeted Services shall, by 30 June 2009, develop procedures to follow in cases where approved foster carers fail to take up training that is either mandatory or is assessed as necessary in order for them to undertake their duties in a competent manner.
11. The Director of Targeted Services and Locality Services shall, by 30 June 2009, ensure that the views of children/young people in placement and the views of children/young people who have left a placement since the last review shall be ascertained as part of the annual foster care review process.
12. The Director of Targeted Services shall, by 30 June 2009, amend the Foster Carer Approval form whereby consent is given by any Foster Carer upon approval to the Rotherham Fostering Service to contacting their General Practitioner or other relevant health professional for updated information about the health of the Foster Carers on an annual basis.
13. The Director of Targeted Services shall, by 30 June 2009, devise a form to be dispatched to GPs for completion in respect of all foster carers on an annual basis to confirm or otherwise the carers' health status.
14. The Director of Locality Services shall, by 30 June 2009, undertake an audit of language used to describe looked after children and if that review demonstrates that pejorative or value-laden terms are used, then training should be offered to enable the social worker to use accurate and clear terms which the young person will not find offensive when reading their social care records.
15. The Director of Locality Services to seek urgent legal advice by 30 April 2009 in relation to the status of FC9 and FC10 as children who are freed for adoption

RMBC Neighbourhood & Adult Services

There are no additional recommendations.

Steve Pearson

CYPS Communications Manager

Prepared on behalf of Rotherham Safeguarding Children Board