

Serious Case Review Key

Learning for Improved Practice

Background

In 2012 a school in West Sussex made a number of referrals about concerns they had regarding young teenage girls aged between 13 and 15 years old, frequently visiting a local address, using illegal drugs and having sex with older men. This led to investigations and subsequently two men were convicted. Key themes that have emerged from the serious case review include:

Key Themes

1. Practitioners having the confidence to identify child sexual abuse and exploitation.

- **The review found:**

Some practitioners saw the young people as active participants rather than victims of child sexual abuse. This meant that the seriousness and significance of the crimes were minimalised and played down.

- **We've learnt that:**

Child sexual exploitation (CSE) [↗](#), which is a form of sexual abuse is not an independent category of concern and includes and overlaps with other forms of abuse. Children and young people who are involved in CSE will often trust or depend on their abuser. This can make it especially challenging for professionals to identify and intervene.

How to think about this in your practice:

- Ensure your safeguarding knowledge around sexual abuse and exploitation is up to date and that you are aware of the behaviour indicators of young people but also adults and **what this may look like** [↗](#).
- Be curious, ask questions and ensure you have the opportunity to discuss any concerns with your line manager during regular meetings including supervisions, team meetings and ad hoc opportunities.

2. Recognising and responding to underage sexual activity

- **The review found:**

Professionals were not curious and pro-active in asking questions and challenging the issue of underage sexual activity. The meaning of consent in the context of underage sexual activity, and the signs of exploitation in relation to this, were not fully understood at the time of the incident, which led to a weakness in professional responses.

- **We've learnt that:**

It is important to understand that a young person often doesn't see or present them self as the victim, but that they are consenting to sexual activity by not feeling they can say no. It is therefore important to understand the risk factors around CSE, and consider the nature of the relationship and balance of power between the individuals involved.

How to think about this in your practice:

- In line with the [Pan Sussex Guidance](#), you should always **make a referral** to Children's Social Care or the Police in cases involving children aged less than 13. In cases of sexual activity involving a **child aged 13 to 15** you should always consider whether there should be a discussion with other agencies and whether a referral should be made to Children's Social Care.
- Make sure you are aware of what true consent means.
- Are you confident about [Fraser Guidelines?](#) Click [here](#) to find out more about healthy sexual behaviour. Perseverance is crucial when developing and maintaining relationships with young people.
- Ensure your practice is focussed on the vulnerable child rather than the challenging behaviour.

3. Escalation

- **The review found:**

Professionals involved were not aware of how to escalate concerns within their own organisations or to the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB). Although steps were taken to raise concerns, a formal process for the escalation of safeguarding concerns was not followed. Because of this, young people were left vulnerable and without support.

- **We've learnt that:**

The decision not to escalate concerns around this situation was taken by different line managers in several organisations. Only one organisation involved felt strongly enough to escalate their concerns, but this in itself failed to have any impact.

How to think about this in your practice:

- Make sure you are confident with your organisation's escalation process. Be honest and open with your manager if you are not satisfied with their decision of not taking your concerns further and ensure these conversations are recorded to provide an accurate timeline of events, responses and actions taken.
- Click [here](#) for information on dealing with professional differences and how to escalate these.

4. Professionals' level of expectations and thresholds reflected the location where the abuse took place

- **The review found:**

This case took place in an area of West Sussex that is considered to be more deprived. Because of this, there were professionals whose attitudes and expectations of the young people involved were lower due to where they lived.

- **We've learnt that:**

Pre-conceived attitudes from professionals around deprivation and affluence can act as barriers to building positive, professional relationships with young people and their families. This can lead to non-engagement by the family which will ultimately impact negatively on the outcome for that young person.

How to think about this in your practice:

- It's important to reflect on your practice across different geographical locations, to make sure that regardless of where children or young people live, you consistently apply the same priorities and expectations around their safeguarding.
- It's also important to consider whether factors around social class or postcode could influence your response to a child or family's needs. Allowing these factors to influence our approach could lead to safeguarding issues in perceived areas of deprivation or affluence being undetected.

5. Practitioners awareness of new tools and processes for responding to CSE

- **The review found:**

Some of the organisations involved did not have robust procedures in place, around how to identify and tackle CSE. This led to a failure to recognise and respond effectively.

- **We've learnt that:**

CSE is not a standalone issue and needs to be seen in context, alongside other issues affecting the family and young person. Shared ways of working across organisations enable professionals to use a common language around how to identify and tackle CSE effectively.

How to think about this in your practice:

- Familiarise yourself with the **tools and processes for responding to CSE** [↗](#) and ensure these are available to you in your workplace.
- Make these resources work for you by using them to support your professional judgement rather than replace it.
- Use these CSE tools and processes to assist your work with young people and their families by being reflective and initiating open and honest conversations around your concerns and worries.