

## Practice issues from Serious Case Reviews

### 1. Disagreement about use of early help assessment

#### What is the issue?

Agencies use the Common Assessment Framework because they've been told to, even though they don't agree with this suggestion

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Early help is intended to address problems as soon as they arise and should be based on an early help assessment, for example using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). Our analysis of SCR reports found examples of professionals undertaking a CAF on the advice of children's social care (CSC), despite thinking the family needed statutory intervention.

In one case, a health visitor made a referral to CSC who advised her to undertake a CAF. The health visitor said she thought the CAF was not appropriate for that family, but the issue was left unresolved. The health visitor did not escalate her concerns.

The reports we analysed mainly referred to the CAF, which is reflected in the wording of this briefing. However, we are aware that many areas are now using different forms of early help assessment.

#### Why does this occur?

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The **analysis within the SCR reports** found the following reasons for carrying out a CAF, despite ongoing safeguarding concerns:

- professionals feeling unable to challenge the decisions of another agency, and unsure about trusting their own judgement

This document is one of a set of 14 briefings intended to support managers, senior managers and practitioners by:

- identifying difficult issues in multi-agency safeguarding work, focusing on interprofessional communication and decision-making
- exploring why these issues arise, and therefore how they might be addressed.

The briefings are based on analysis of 38 Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) published between May 2014 and April 2015, augmented by information gathered from multi-agency summits in London, Leeds and Birmingham. The summits were held in September 2015 and were attended by 194 practitioners and managers from across children's social care, health, education, police, probation and Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs).

The briefings are the result of a pilot process that developed and tested new ways that SCR findings can be shared and used to support improvement.

- escalation procedures not being used, or a lack of confidence in escalating concerns
- referrals from senior practitioners not being checked by managers.

**Participants at the three summits** also identified a number of underlying reasons for this issue including the following:

### Professional hierarchy and challenge

Professionals described their perceived difficulty in getting referrals accepted by CSC, and the difficulty of challenging CSC advice. One participant said:

*‘It’s an issue of hierarchy with CSC at the top and you have to really build up your case before they’ll even listen to you.’  
(Specialist Safeguarding Practitioner)*

### Lack of clarity regarding service thresholds

Participants also identified that a lack of clarity about thresholds between services, and when families’ needs were sufficiently serious to require social care involvement. One person commented:

*‘There seems to be confusion of understanding the threshold to include social care, all agencies, and early care.’  
(Named Nurse)*

Another commented:

*‘In [my area] I’m finding it harder to progress a case to Child in Need status. Unless I can clearly outline a role for a social worker it won’t go through.’ (Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub social worker)*

### How CAFs are used and who is best placed to complete them

Participants reported a lack of understanding of the CAF process, which may have contributed to feeling unable to challenge advice that one should be undertaken. People said that it was not clear when a CAF should be initiated, what to expect from the process, and in particular the role of the lead professional:

*‘There’s a lack of clarity about what the role of lead professional actually entails and what the term means. I think sometimes people are daunted by that and feel as though they don’t have the skills to do it’. (Named Safeguarding Nurse)*

Some people felt that there was a lack of training about the CAF process.

### Solutions suggested by summit participants

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Participants at the summits suggested the following possible solutions:

- enhance understanding of what the CAF process involves, when it should be initiated and who is best placed to act as lead professional
- improve clarity about the role of a CAF in current child protection and safeguarding policy.

## Questions for you to consider

### Unpicking the issue

1. Is this issue familiar to you?
2. Locally, is the issue exactly the same as described above? If not, what does this issue 'look like' for you?
3. What good practice is there in relation to this issue? Are there weaknesses you are aware of and how would you describe them?

### Why do you think this happens in your local area?

1. Do some or all of the reasons described above apply in your area?
2. Is it an issue that has been identified in local SCRs, audits or inspection feedback? What light have these activities shed on the issue?
3. What knowledge do you have from your own experience about why this happens?
4. What organisational factors are involved locally?
5. How does local culture, custom and practice, within and between agencies, contribute to this?

### Thinking through the solutions

1. Have there been previous efforts locally to address this issue? What was the result?
2. Given your understanding of the reasons for this issue, what further actions do you think would be helpful in addressing it?
3. What strengths can you build on, and what are the areas of difficulty?
4. What action would need to be taken at a strategic or leadership level?
5. Who would need to be involved to achieve improvement?
6. Are there any unintended consequences you anticipate for the different agencies and professions involved?
7. How will you know whether any actions have had an impact?

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