

Serious Case Reviews: Revised Chapter 8 of Working Together to Safeguard Children

Consultation Response Form

department for
children, schools and families

Please give us your comments on the revised Chapter 8 of Working Together to Safeguard Children.

Comments:

Summary

SCIE welcomes Government efforts to improve the quality, consistency and impact of SCRs through the revision of *Working Together's* Chapter 8. We are pleased that reference is made to SCIE's contribution to this field through *Learning Together* (2009). We support the goals that the revisions aim to achieve. Yet these are extremely difficult times in terms of public confidence and staff morale *and* there is striking readiness in the sector to improve how they go about learning from and improving practice. SCIE would therefore encourage a more radical rewrite of this important piece of government guidance.

This would include:

1. Endorsing the regional pilots of the systems approach
2. Requiring people to have a theoretically informed methodology for their SCRs
3. Setting out clear goals for both individual and cross-agency learning but allowing more flexibility in how to achieve this
4. Including an organising framework for key findings to facilitate cross-referencing of SCRs, thematic analyses and cumulative learning
5. Distinguishing types of recommendation for action
6. Clarifying triggers and decision making authority to instigate a SCR

Further details are given below.

1. Requesting Govt endorsement of regional pilots of the systems approach: developing the evidence base

SCIE supports the concern that is expressed in the consultation draft with:

- Explaining how and why events occurred, decisions and actions were taken or not
- Minimising bias in the analysis and collusion or cover up of poor practice (primarily by ensuring the independence)
- Identifying where systems could improve
- Correlating findings with learning from previous SCRs or local case reviews and relevant research
- Ensuring feedback sessions to staff involved in the case at different stages of the process, and ensuring that the process is experienced as a learning exercise for those involved

The systems approach to case reviews can help to achieve each of these goals in specific ways. It holds promise for making each of these processes even more useful than they are now.

Many LSCBs have expressed a strong interest in the systems approach and the potential it holds for improving our learning through case reviews and SCRs. In response, SCIE has made an offer to work collaboratively with the sector on a regional basis to support regional pilots of case reviews and SCRs using the systems model. This will provide further evidence of how the systems approach can help improve learning through case reviews broadly, as well as specifically how it might be utilised in relation to the current processes for SCRs and Ofsted's associated evaluation criteria. Both SCIE and participating regions are keen for **DCSF formally to endorse these pilots and encourage Ofsted to take an active interest in the process and outcomes**. This might allow for the possibility of easily incorporating future findings into Working Together if appropriate.

2. Requiring reviewers to have a method

Finding out what happened in a particular case and why it did so requires interpreting information within the context of an analysis of causal factors. With increasing numbers of agencies working together to safeguard children, these causal pathways are increasingly complex and complicated. This heightens the need for whoever undertakes SCRs to articulate the method they use. This would include transparency in both the theoretical premise and its implications for the investigatory practices. **It should be a requirement in Ch8 that whoever undertakes a SCR explains and justifies their methodology in a transparent manner.**

This is important as a lack of transparency about methods used in the conduct of serious case reviews hampers both the process of quality assurance and the possibility of reflection and learning in order to foster continual improvement in this domain.

The systems approach is one particular method. It has the strength of building on a considerable history in other fields, and incorporating a clear methodology and inbuilt quality control. In the first instance, this is provided by creating a shared, multi-agency review process from the start. Agencies working together and collectively making sense of what has gone on and why, minimises the possibility that any single, strong agency can influence the dominant interpretation of the case and professional practice therein. The second safeguard against common errors of reasoning is provided by drawing on basic social sciences research methodologies for avoiding confirmation bias (Silverman, 2000).

3. Setting out clear goals for individual and cross-agency learning but allowing more flexibility in how to achieve this

Changes proposed to the guidance include clearly setting out that the prime purpose of a SCR is to learn lessons both at an individual agency and inter-agency level. The two-part process of Individual Management Reviews and Overview Reports is, in part, intended to help achieve this dual goal. However, our experience of using the systems model raises concerns that this structure makes it difficult to focus on the interactions between agencies.

This is in large part due to unintentional single agency bias being built in from the start. Discrepant versions of events or perspectives are often only picked up at a late stage and their exploration can therefore be compromised. Anecdotal evidence from overview report authors suggests that they can experience frustration that the information they are provided with via IMRs does not allow them to explore gaps or contradictions between different agencies' accounts, and commissioning arrangements rarely allow (in time or money) for them to supplement the information provided by IMRs through further data collection of their own. Consequently, **more flexibility should be considered in Ch8 guidance concerning the process of securing both intra- and inter-agency learning.**

Our suggestion is that individual agencies should provide only the basic factual chronology of their agency's involvement with the family concerned. Subsequently, representatives from all agencies should be involved in a shared process of data selection, interpretation and analysis e.g. the SCR Panel. This would include having two people from different agencies conduct all the necessary 1-1 conversations with relevant staff not just from their own agencies but from across all agencies. This arrangement would provide opportunity for challenge at an early stage and facilitate a focus on the *interactions between agencies*. It would also militate against "agencies being "silo-ed" via Individual Management Reviews.

4. Including an organising framework for key findings to facilitate cross-referencing of SCRs, thematic analyses and cumulative learning

The consultation draft stresses that the findings of any individual SCR should be considered alongside those of previous SCRs and relevant research e.g. 8.16, 8.41, 8.51, 8.54, 8.55. Yet the current guidance provides no organising framework to enable this cumulative learning.

In other high risk areas of work, it has been found valuable to collate common issues arising in different areas of the country so that persistent patterns of weaknesses in practice are identified and can be rectified at a higher level, feeding back solutions to local levels. Part of the Learning Together systems model includes a 6-part typology of underlying patterns of systemic influence on practice to support that aim. This provides a conceptual framework for organising all the layers of interaction influencing the work done with a family. **Chapter 8 should include an organising framework for key findings about current strengths and weaknesses in multi-agency systems, such as that provided in Learning Together.** The benefits of this would be to facilitate sufficient consistency so as to make comparisons across cases straightforward to conduct. This would provide greater opportunity for cumulative learning from SCRs. It would avoid duplication of effort across single LSCBs and regional LSCB networks, GO offices and Ofsted, many of whom currently conduct their own, separate thematic analyses.

5. Distinguishing three types of recommendation for action

The SCIE-led work piloting the systems model in case reviews suggests that it is useful to distinguish between three different kinds of recommendations for action. These include:

1. Issues with clear cut solutions that can be addressed locally and by all relevant agencies. E.g. creating a consistent rule in respect of copying people into correspondence.
2. Issues where solutions are not so easy or precise because competing priorities and inevitable resource constraints mean there are no easy answers so judgement and compromise are required. For example, paying more attention in supervision to detecting errors of human reasoning requires more time – can that be obtained by cutting back on other tasks? These issues are most appropriately dealt with by the relevant management teams.
3. Issues that require further research and development in order to find solutions, including those that would need to be addressed at a national level. As noted above, in other high risk areas of work, it has been found valuable to collate common issues arising in different areas of the country so that persistent patterns of weaknesses in practice are identified and can be rectified at a higher level, feeding back solutions to local levels.

Chapter 8 should differentiate between types of recommendations for action.

6. Clarifying triggers and decision making authority to instigate a SCR

The list of questions in Section 8.10 are presented to help in deciding whether or not a case should be subject to a SCR. It leaves a lot of room for discretion, particularly as the answers are often not knowable until after the review has taken place. This leaves open the possibility for differences of opinion between, for example Ofsted and a LSCB. **Clarity is needed about who has the authority to decide whether or not a case should be subject to a SCR.**

In addition to SCRs, SCIE has been encouraging the use of the systems approach to learn from a whole range of cases - good, poor, innovative, puzzling etc. As it provides a way of conceptualising the complex causal networks in multi-agency practice, it has considerable potential to facilitate learning about success as well as failure. To date, the field of child welfare has been hampered in developing greater understanding of good practice by case reviews being generally illustrative only of poor practice. **LSCBs should be encouraged to learn from a range of cases as opposed to lowering the threshold for SCRs to cases with poor outcomes alone.**

REFERENCES:

Fish, S., Munro, E., Bairstow, S. (2009) *Working together to safeguard children: developing a multi-agency systems approach for case reviews*. London: SCIE.

Silverman, D. (2000) *Doing qualitative research: A practical handbook*, London: Sage

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