

Practice issues from Serious Case Reviews

14. Lack of communication between children's and adults' social care

What is the issue?

Professionals in children's and adults' social care not communicating when needed

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In some cases where there are concerns about children, parents are receiving support in their own right, for example from adults' social care (ASC). The services providing support to the adult are likely to hold vital information about their vulnerability and support needs which could help to understand their parenting capacity and any support they may require.

In our analysis of SCRs, we found examples in which potentially useful information held by ASC was not shared with, or sought by, children's social care (CSC) services. For example, in one case of neglect, an ASC assessment concluding that the mother was too vulnerable to live independently did not inform CSC decision-making about where her children should be placed.

Why does this occur?

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The **analysis within the SCR reports** for these cases highlights a number of reasons why there was a lack of communication between ASC and CSC. In particular there was a lack of understanding of each other's roles and how to work together in order to attain a whole-family assessment to protect both children and vulnerable parents.

Participants at the three summits also identified a number of underlying reasons, noting that many of these apply to all adult services, not just ASC. These included the following:

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.

Complexity introduced by issues of consent

Practitioners at the summits talked about how issues of consent may affect their decisions to share information. This was clearly perceived to be a sensitive area. For some, there were concerns that seeking consent to share information would break down working relationships with service users:

'There's such a worry that people say "I didn't ask for permission because I didn't want to ruin my relationship with that person". It's a lack of confidence.'
(Principal Social Worker)

For others, sharing information had resulted in complaints being submitted.

Participants' comments also demonstrated a lack of shared understanding about when consent was needed. Some participants thought that information about adults receiving ASC could never be shared without consent, whereas others thought it could be shared if it was 'in the child's best interest'.

Influence of who is viewed as your 'client'

Participants' comments suggested that those working in ASC may be reluctant to communicate and share information with CSC because they view the wellbeing of the adult as being their primary concern. One participant said:

'Adult workers don't want to be seen to be providing information which results in a child being taken away – they feel responsible for that and to protect the adult.' (Safeguarding Adults Board Manager)

Access to records

The lack of joined up IT systems and recording structures was seen as frustrating by participants. Services were not able to check each other's records when working with a family and were therefore not always able to recognise when another agency was involved.

Lack of understanding of each other's roles and services

Feedback from participants at the summits suggested that not knowing when to share or request information was part of a wider pattern of lack of understanding between ASC and CSC services. One participant said:

'I went to adult social workers' training and felt like I had no clue about who they were in terms of common ground because the adult model is so different.'
(Conference Chair)

Another said:

'It always surprises me that we are both social care – there's very little communication between the two services.' (Child Protection Consultant)

Overall capacity and scarcity of resources

Several participants mentioned the impact of people's overall capacity on effective joint working. One participant said:

'It's all about resources as well – lack of resources makes people become more and more insular, dealing with one bit, and this becomes dangerous.' (Business Manager)

Solutions suggested by summit participants

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Participants at the summits suggested the following possible solutions:

- shared information systems
- joint training across the service groups
- joint Children's and Adults' Safeguarding Boards
- practitioner peer meetings – like supervision – around difficult cases
- multi-agency safeguarding hub (MASH) arrangements had made a difference in some areas
- opportunities for multi-agency reflective thinking.

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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