

Just because they say they are not drinking or taking drugs ... be curious, seek evidence

This case focuses on the death of a two-month-old baby who sustained multiple rib fractures which led to the baby's death. The baby was subject of a Child Protection Plan for neglect from birth, due to concerns about mother's parenting capacity, alcohol and substance misuse and previous abusive relationships. Throughout the baby's short life, health and social work professionals in Birmingham and Solihull worked closely with the family, undertaking regular visits. The mother consistently told professionals that she was no longer drinking or taking drugs. Further evidence should have been sought and a programme of drug testing should have continued.

When discharged from hospital mother and baby initially resided in Birmingham, before moving to temporary accommodation in Solihull. This move brought about a change in professionals working with the family and a reduction in support for the mother. A receiving-in Initial Child Protection Conference was arranged; however, sadly the baby died prior to the meeting being held.

The mother was subsequently found guilty of manslaughter and two counts of grievous bodily harm and received a custodial sentence of thirteen-and-a-half years. The review concluded that there was good inter-agency working between the two local authorities and that the pre-birth plan was thorough and appropriately identified risk. There was no information or evidence available to agencies and professionals involved at the time which would have led them to be able to predict the tragic outcome in this case. However, the review identified important learning for professionals.

Key Learning

- In this case the mother provided assurance that she was not taking drugs, but did not attend all drug testing appointments, which went unchallenged.
- There was a lack of recognition that risk is dynamic, and therefore assessment and management of risk needed to be flexible to respond to periods of increased risk. For this mother, it was the festive period.
- Lack of attendance by key professionals at the Initial Child Protection Conference undermined the effectiveness of information sharing.
- There was a reduction in the continuity of care and support provided to the mother during the move to new accommodation in a different local authority.

Improving Practice

- When working with parents with addictions be mindful of 'disguised compliance'. You should not rely solely on assurances of abstinence but need to seek evidence of positive change. A failure to attend a substance misuse appointment should be considered as a potential positive test.
- When working with a family you need to establish trust, remain curious, even sceptical,

but always focus on the needs of the child, particularly when they are pre-mobile and pre-verbal.

- When convening an Initial Child Protection Conference and Core Group, it is essential that all of the key agencies working with the family attend or share relevant information if unable to attend.
- Where there are cross-border implications there is a need to ensure that you are familiar with your agency's inter-agency transfer protocol and are able to apply it to your practice, especially where there are safeguarding concerns.

Next Steps – What you can do

- Circulate this 'Briefing Note' to all members of your team.
- Discuss the case at your next team meeting and use the [Powerpoint Presentation](#) to make sure everyone understands and is able to apply the learning.
- Social Workers should familiarise themselves with the new [Inter-Agency Transfer Protocol](#) between Birmingham Children's Trust and Solihull Children's Services.
- Encourage your team to attend 'Working with Substance Misusing Parents' and 'Working with Resistant Families' training available on www.lscpbirmingham.org.uk.