

Learning briefing

Serious Case Review: Ross

Synopsis of the case and review

The statutory review examined the involvement of agencies and professionals with a child, who for the purposes of this review will be known as Ross. The Partnership Board was interested in examining a number of areas which included opportunities for assessment and intervention, thresholds, health care and educational support, and multi-agency working. A thorough and systematic review was undertaken, led by an experienced Independent Reviewer – Kevin Ball. Those that had worked with Ross were given the opportunity to contribute. A Review Panel was established to support the smooth and timely completion of the review, and comprised of representatives from key agencies involved with Ross. The Review Panel benefitted from being Chaired by a senior agency leader based on the island. The review began in June 2021 and concluded in December 2021. Ross, his father and mother, were given the opportunity to read and comment on the review report.

From birth, Ross experienced considerable adversity. This adversity continued throughout his childhood up until the incident which prompted the review. His experiences included specialist health care needs – which were often not met, persisting parental alcohol use, drug use and drug dealing, witnessing disorderly and violent behaviour, witnessing domestic abuse, parental mental health issues, and likely exposed to sexual grooming. Ross was subject to a multi-agency Child Protection Plan on two separate occasions, and had contact with a number of health and welfare agencies on the island. In more recent years, Ross was found in the company of peers under the influences of alcohol and possibly drugs; members of the peer group were well known to other agencies.

Summary of local learning identified as a result of the review

Ross experienced considerable adversity from birth, which continued through his childhood. This adversity created vulnerability and risk, for which no respite has been identified despite multiple professionals being involved in his life. Based on known information to date, Ross's life pathway may have been compromised.

Throughout, Ross clearly expressed his worries and emotion to professionals. Whilst this was observed and recorded by professionals, the prevailing response did not provide the right help at the right time.

Despite attempts by many practitioners from across the Partnership, efforts to work with Ross and his family occurred in relative isolation of one another and on an episodic basis; with limited coordination or effective communication. The detail of what was happening to Ross was often known about, but not matched with a concerted and robust multi-agency effort, for example, an assessment of parenting was not completed.

There is a need for greater professional challenge and better communication about professional differences, review of how thresholds are interpreted and applied, better information sharing to encourage timely and effective decision making, and improved management oversight. The application of a trauma informed approach to case management would have been helpful.

Specific learning points about the assessment & response to identified need and risk, and thresholds.

The importance of early assessment and early help cannot be under-estimated, particularly for children with identified additional needs from birth. When parents do not engage, or partially engage with services, considerations should always be given to forming a multi-agency chronology to assess for patterns that may create risk.

Behaviours exhibited by children and young people which may be viewed as inappropriate, and which are viewed as disruptive and challenging to respond to, are often symptomatic of deeper underlying problems and reflect a child's

way of coping; from an adult perspective the child is seen as challenging, yet from a child's perspective they may be trying to cope with their circumstances.

Assessing parental capacity plus parental capacity to change are two key activities for those cases where risk factors are in plain sight. Assessing these factors sooner rather than later should increase the likelihood of timely decision making in order to improve outcomes for a child. Parental willingness to work with professionals should not be interpreted as having the capacity to change, especially if there are entrenched risk factors.

Balancing the need to support and protect young people that are disadvantaged by either their life history and circumstances and who then become offenders, with punishing their deeds when lines are crossed, can often require fine judgements. Noticing indicators that signify a shift in how a case is being managed, exercising curiosity about this

shift and whether it is appropriate, all require good quality management oversight as well as critical thinking.

*Children who live with domestic abuse are victims too.
Consideration should always be given to
understanding the child's daily experiences of living in
such an environment.*

Specific learning points about hearing, understanding, & responding to, the child's experiences of day-to-day life.

The use of a professional differences, professional disagreements or escalation protocol should be viewed as routine and healthy across a multi-agency partnership when there are concerns about a child's welfare. Helping all professionals gain the confidence to disagree or challenge should form part of each agency's responsibility to their staff development and management support.

All professionals that come into contact with children in need, or at risk of harm, have a responsibility to exercise a determined curiosity about the child's experiences. This equates to examining the available evidence, noticing patterns, and being open and receptive to those unexpected moments where a child discloses information that might not be neatly expressed in a way that is labelled 'help'; but nonetheless, is an implicit signal of distress or harm. The next stage – what you do with this information – is critical. Considering a children's rights perspective may add a new dimension to how this information is treated (Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Specific learning points about human factors which had an impact on assessment & intervention.

The use of assessment and intervention methodologies - such as restorative or trauma informed models - can often support busy professionals think about how they approach and work with a child or family. Underpinning any methodological approach, is a need to maintain a clear focus on the safety and welfare of the child.

Reflecting on the emotional impact of working with vulnerable children is an important aspect of effective professional practice in order to avoid, for example bias forming. Providing practitioners that work with vulnerable children opportunities to explore their feelings is a key requirement to working effectively and remaining child focused. Senior leaders, managers and designated professionals have a responsibility to ensure these opportunities are provided to their workforce on a regular and scheduled basis to reduce the likelihood of poor decisions being made.

Specific learning points about the quality and effectiveness of collaboration & partnership working.

Child Protection Conferences, and other multi-agency public protection forums often provide a good indicator about how well agencies work together at all levels; they depend on collaborative working that is relationship based, and work best when embedded within a wider system of strong networking, at both senior and local practitioner levels.

Where health and medical needs are identified which require the input of a number of professionals from different health disciplines it is important to ensure there is a multi-disciplinary plan in place that is regularly reviewed, alongside effective coordination and communication.

As well as actions identified by each agency that contributed, the review concluded with 11 recommendations for the Partnership to strengthen and improve working arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of children.

