

Willow Child Safeguarding Practice Review 6 Step Briefing

The Background

Willow is a 17-year-old young person who is currently in the care of Southampton City Council in foster care.

Between 2006 when Willow was born and 2019, the local authority undertook a number of assessments with regards to Willow and her siblings due to concerns around physical abuse, neglect, lack of supervision, maternal drug abuse and domestic abuse which led to the children being made subject to child protection planning in July 2019.

Willow was accommodated in July 2019 due to contextual safeguarding concerns in relation to poor school attendance, cannabis use, missing episodes and her associates. She was returned to the care of her mother in October 2019 following a breakdown in her foster placement, however was again accommodated in November 2020 following an allegation of serious physical abuse being made against Willow's mother and older sister.

The Incident

Whilst in foster care, contextual safeguarding concerns continued to be raised, and it was felt, particularly following incidents between January-November 2022, that Willow was at risk of exploitation, in particular sexual exploitation.

In January 2023, Willow made a number of non-recent reports of sexual assault and rape against adult males. Willow disclosed that one male sexually assaulted and raped her in December 2021 and January 2022. One incident reportedly occurred at a friend's address and one at a hotel. Willow had known the male through her friendship group at the time. A third report was made against a previous boyfriend, also an adult male, including domestic abuse which took place over a number of weeks and a violent incident at her foster placement. All of these reported incidents took place whilst Willow was in the care of Southampton City Council.

The Review

The Southampton Serious Incident and Learning Group determined that the reports made by Willow and her risk of sexual abuse and exploitation met the threshold for a child safeguarding practice review (CSPR) to be undertaken, with the time period under review being from January 2021 to January 2023. Information to inform the review was gathered from involved agencies through the rapid review process, individual management reviews and a multi-agency practitioner's event.

Willow was invited to participate in the CSPR process, however has declined to do so at this time. Willow was also asked for her consent for the review to speak with her family, in particular her mother, however she also declined this.

Key Lines of Enquiry

The review has considered the following key lines of enquiry:

- The reporting and review of missing child episodes, including appropriate use of the Philomena protocol, the grading of missing episodes, and use of the '3 in 90' procedure.
- The use and grading of the Child Exploitation Risk Assessment Framework (CERAF) tool
- Listening to the voice of the child or young person.
- The convening of strategy discussions and compliance with Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023.
- The support and training of carers with regards to the Risks Outside The Home (ROTH) for vulnerable children or young people.

Findings

- During missing episodes, Willow's missing status was not graded as high risk, and as such, further actions reserved for high risk missing persons could not be taken by the police. Following the decision to undertake a CSPR, the police have made changes to the way missing episodes are graded when the young person is looked after, with the exploitation risks being closely considered.
- The Philomena protocol focuses on the multi-agency response when looked after children are reported missing by their carer. Practitioners felt that the expectations when a young person goes missing should be discussed at the initial placement agreement meeting and updated regularly.
- Practitioners felt that professionals were using CERAFs (child exploitation risk assessment framework) as assessments rather than as a tool, and that too much information was being shared when CERAFs were being completed. Practitioners felt that professionals should be reminded and asked to refresh their CERAF training.
- Willow had voiced that she did not feel that professionals had asked her the right questions. Also due to staff changes Willow did not have a trusted adult with whom she could build a relationship. Practitioners acknowledged that staff changes and rotations in residential settings meant this can be difficult. Practitioners felt that an Independent Visitor would have been beneficial for Willow, and that advocacy services being involved with children and young people would allow their voices to be heard.
- The MET Team have now developed a new proforma to capture the voices of young people who are at medium or high risk of going missing.
- Whilst strategy discussions were convened to discuss Willow, these were not always compliant with Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 due to health services either not being invited, or not having the capacity to attend.
- The review felt that some of the language used by carers suggested that they may not have understood the risk outside the home (ROTH) posed to Willow, and that further support and training should be made available to carers in relation to this so that bespoke packages of care can be offered to young people.
- The review noted that Southampton City council had now introduced ROTH conferencing.

Recommendations

- The SSCP require assurance from statutory partners of compliance with Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 to ensure that the appropriate professionals are invited to and are attending strategy discussions.
- Allocated social workers and supervising social workers to ensure that alongside generic training for carers, each young person has a package of support in place tailored to their individual needs. Children's social care to provide assurance to the SSCP that this package of support should include specific interventions and planning for looked after children at risk of exploitation and outside the home.
- The SSCP to be provided with assurance that the language used in respect of children, young people and their families is appropriate and not derogatory or victim blaming. Partner agencies to provide evidence of developmental work in this area, including the views of children, young people and their families.
- That the Partnership asks the relevant partner agencies to provide assurance regarding what is being done to prevent school exclusion for children who are at risk of exploitation.
- University Hospital Southampton to detail the pathway for safeguarding concerns to the local authority with assurance that this is understood and followed by the Emergency Department.
- Hampshire and Isle of Wight Constabulary to provide assurance to the SSCP of the processes now in place to ensure a timely and proportionate reporting of missing children and young people.

Useful Links for Best Practice

1. [HIPS CSA Toolkit - Child Sexual Abuse – Southampton Safeguarding Children Partnership \(southamptonscp.org.uk\)](https://southamptonscp.org.uk)
2. [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 - Working together to safeguard children 2023 | Summary of changes | NSPCC Learning](#)