

### Background to the Review

Theo was ten months old when he died in his parent’s care during the COVID-19 second national lockdown. He suffered multiple injuries and his parents have been convicted of his murder. Theo and his elder sibling, Ruby were in care proceedings at the point of his death. A review was commissioned to explore the quality of practice and to identify the improvements needed to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. Some of Theo’s family members contributed to the review which helped to shape the learning areas and recommendations. The review was published in March 2024: [“Theo”: Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review \(case summary, learning and recommendations\)](#).

### Theo’s Lived Experience

Theo’s mother faced difficulties with her emotional health, strained family relationships and trauma. She regularly used cannabis. Theo’s father had an abusive childhood and poor emotional health. He also used substances and had a history of offending behaviour including domestic abuse. These factors were not sufficiently understood by agencies and were an enduring part of Theo’s life which impacted on him significantly. The review explored practice in Ruby’s case to help understand Theo’s experiences.

### Key Messages For Professionals

#### The Quality of Parenting Assessments

- Assessments should be objective and evidence based.
- Parents should be encouraged to reflect on what difficulties they faced when they cared for elder sibling(s) to help analyse how they can avoid similar challenges in future.
- Longstanding substance use by parents and how this may prevent change should be evaluated.
- Parental capacity and motivation to work with services should be assessed in depth.
- Partner agencies should share information, contribute to assessments and challenge each other.
- Assessments should be scrutinised by managers to help plan how to respond to risk and how to support children and their families.

#### Recognising the Difference Between Family Arrangements and Being Looked After

- Professionals should understand the difference between family arrangements and when a child is received into care as a “looked after child” and the implications of each on permanence planning.
- Carers should be given appropriate advice and information and their legal status should be communicated to the professional group.

#### The Effective Use of Pre Proceedings

- Care proceedings should progress in a timely way. Risks for unborn children should be considered at the earliest opportunity, including applying the appropriate legal framework where necessary.
- Managers should scrutinise casework and make decisions to divert children from care proceedings where appropriate whilst having a keen eye on timely and effective permanence planning for children who cannot live with their parents.

#### Concealed Pregnancy

- Using [guidance and assessment tools](#), professionals should explore with parents the reasons for concealing a pregnancy and consider the significance of those and the associated vulnerabilities.
- If required, child protection processes should occur in a timely manner once a pregnancy is known.

#### Parental Cannabis Use as A Feature of Family Life

- Professionals should remember that cannabis use is a risk factor impacting on children’s safety.
- Substance misuse services and children’s services should work together, supported by robust protocols which detail arrangements for risk assessment, safeguarding and information sharing.
- Professionals should observe and explore with parents the significance and function of cannabis.
- Professionals should challenge parents about their cannabis use to ensure that assessments and plans accurately reflect concerns.
- Safeguarding risks related to cannabis use including parent’s emotional health and domestic abuse should be identified and discussed during supervision with managers.

#### Increasing the Level of Multi Agency Work in Care Proceedings

- Agencies should keep a joint focus on safeguarding and intervention during care proceedings to continue to promote children’s welfare and development in line with threshold for significant harm.
- Involved professionals should be clear about the plans for children, the implications of legal processes and how permanence will be achieved.

#### Reunifying Children With Their Parents During Care Proceedings

- Professionals should understand the risks in reunification when children are completely dependent on their parent’s care.
- The transition plan should include high level support and challenge to make reunification viable.
- Partner agencies and family members should be involved in transition planning and in developing the support plan.
- Circumstances which may impact on the success of the transition plan and the consequences should be clearly defined to provide a foundation for professional judgement.

#### Safeguarding Children Following Their Return Home

- Professionals should stay alert to the possibility that children could still be harmed.
- A clear contingency plan should be developed to respond to risks, especially injuries.
- Parents should receive regular practical support to help professionals identify signs of deterioration.
- Professionals should adhere to the expectations in the child’s plan, they should communicate frequently to evaluate concerns and progress and reflect on these during supervision with managers.

#### Working with Families Who appear to be Avoiding Contact With Professionals

- Professionals should engage parents in the safeguarding plan and persist when it is difficult to access the home or when there is unwillingness to work constructively with services.
- Professionals should aim to develop open and trusting relationships with parents that facilitate support and challenge and prompt consistent and effective safeguarding practice to enable change.
- Increasing concerns should be raised with the professional group and escalated if necessary.

#### Responding to Issues of Domestic Violence and Abuse

- Professionals should be alert to indicators of domestic abuse such as damage in the home. Enquiries should be made with parents individually to assess risk and to explore if the relationship should end.
- Practice guidance and assessment tools should support professionals to explore the nature and extent of domestic abuse between parents. The findings and analysis should then be included in assessments and support plans to help improve parenting capacity.



**Theo’s family member: “the transition back to parents should not be rushed and if parents are testing positive for drugs then this needs to be considered in the child’s plan”**