

National Review Panel

**Review undertaken in respect of the death of Karen, a young
person known to the child protection system**

Executive Summary

August 2014

This was undertaken as a concise review. Social work records were reviewed and interviews were held with social work staff and line managers as well as members of Karen's family.

Background

Karen very sadly took her own life when she was fifteen years of age. She had been in contact with HSE Children and Family Services for some time before her death, mainly concerning aspects of her behaviour and her relationship with her parents. Each time that a report was made about Karen, the social work department responded and visited the family but Karen was not always seen individually. The case was managed by the duty system in the area and was not allocated to an individual social worker so that the family met different workers each time a concern arose. In the context of a large volume of reports made to the area insufficient capacity to allocate work, this case was not considered a high priority for a long period. Karen was involved with a Garda Diversion Project and with a youth counselling service, and there was good communication between these agencies and the HSE SWD. It was ultimately decided to allocate the case to a newly appointed social worker but unfortunately Karen died before this could happen.

Findings

The review found no link between the quality of services offered to Karen and her very tragic death and acknowledges the number of services involved and the occurrence of positive engagement at times between Karen and these services. It did find certain weaknesses in practice, including a delay at one point in the SWD response to a reported physical assault on Karen on one occasion with an ensuing limited investigation. The also review found that the non-allocation of the case and the fact that a number of different workers were involved meant that social work contact was not as in-depth as it might otherwise have been and caused frustration to her family. It also found that initial assessments were somewhat superficial and attributes this partially to the format of the initial assessment template in use and also to the considerable pressure under which the local SWD was operating at the time. Critically, the review found limited direct engagement between the SWD and Karen.

Key Learning Points

The review highlights the following points for reflection and learning:

- The need to meet with young people in order to conduct an adequate assessment is highlighted in a range of key learning from previous inquiries (Broadhurst et al, 2010).¹ When an allegation is made against a parent it is of critical importance that the social worker meets with the young person on their own to ensure that the young person's perspective is heard. An adequate assessment of the presenting concerns cannot be made without carrying out this fundamental task. The Children First Practice Handbook which emphasises the importance of meeting with children and young people separately and ascertaining their perspective in relation to child protection and welfare concerns, should be adhered to in this regard. A central finding of a range of research exploring young people's help-seeking behaviour notes that responsiveness to concerns raised is key as is establishing trust via a relationship with an individual worker (Buckley et al, 2008; Jobe and Gorin, 2010)².
- Care should be taken to ensure that child protection and welfare systems and practices are responsive to the specific needs of teenagers. Some research has demonstrated that social work services can underestimate the child protection and welfare needs of teenagers, because of difficulties with engagement or through an over-optimistic view of young people's resilience (e.g. Hicks and Stein, 2010).³ In this case, the young person's age at the time of referral (early teens) to the social work department may have influenced the low priority afforded to this case from the outset. This suggests that more attention should be paid by social work services to the specific needs of adolescents and the manner in which services respond to these young peoples' needs.
- The central importance of adequate assessment is emphasised in a range of research literature and inquiries into child deaths (Broadhurst et al, 2010; Bunting and Reid 2005)⁴. Key elements of best practice include gathering and assessing information from a range of sources and recognising the dynamic nature of young people's life circumstances. In the opinion of the review team, the Initial Assessment Form (IAF) is not fit for purpose in this

¹ Broadhurst, K., White, C.; Fish, S.; Munro, E.; Fletcher, K. & Lincoln, H. (2010) *Ten Pitfalls and how to Avoid Them. What Research Tells Us*. London: NSPCC

² Buckley, H., Whelan, S., Carr, N. & Murphy, C. (2008) *Service Users' Perceptions of the Irish Child Protection System*. Dublin: Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs; Jobe, A. & Gorin, S. (2010) 'If kids don't feel safe they don't do anything': young people's views on seeking and receiving help from Children's Social Services in England.' *Child and Family Social Work*, doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00862.x

³ Hicks, L. & Stein, M. (2010) *Neglect Matters. A multi-agency guide for professionals working together on behalf of teenagers*. London

⁴ Bunting, L. & Reid, C. (2005) 'Reviewing child deaths: learning from the American experience.' *Child Abuse Review*, 14,2: 82-96

respect. Moreover, the absence of a more comprehensive standardised structured assessment tool further mitigates against good practice in this area.

- Research on service users' interactions with the child protection and welfare system notes that perceptions of the system and willingness to engage are mediated through contact with individual workers (Buckley et al, 2010).⁵ The retention of cases on the duty system resulting in interactions with multiple social workers and a lack of a consistent 'face' of the service mitigates against engagement beyond the surface of presenting issues.

15. Recommendations

- The Child and Family Agency should review the adequacy of the current Initial Assessment Forms (IAF) and agree and implement one standardised assessment tool (both initial and comprehensive) on a national basis.

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⁵ Buckley, H., Carr, N. & Whelan, S. (2010) 'Like walking on egg-shells': service user views and expectations of the child protection system.' *Child and Family Social Work*, 16, 1: 101-110