



National Review Panel

**Review undertaken in respect of a death experienced by Zac, a young person
known to the Child and Family Agency**

Executive Summary

February 2017

Introduction and background

This review concerns the death of a young person here known by the pseudonym of Zac at the age of 16 years. His death was certified by the coroner as suicide. Zac suffered from a developmental disorder which affected his ability to socialise and communicate and also impacted on his behaviour. While he got on relatively well at school, Zac manifested a different type of personality at home; he was described as both violent and stubborn at times, but also loveable and affectionate. Zac was referred to his local social work department (SWD) twice, once when he was nine years old and again when he was 16. The first referral was made by a child psychiatrist, to whom Zac had alleged physical abuse by his father. This was investigated through discussions with his mother who assured the duty social worker that while Zac's father had hit him, it had happened only three times, and had been the result of both carers' inability to manage his aggressive behaviour. The case was closed several months later on the basis of Zac's mother's assurances that he had become easier to manage and was no longer at risk of physical chastisement. No discussions were held with Zac or his father in the intervening period. It was noted that the assessing social worker was known personally to Zac's mother but there is no evidence that any acknowledgement was made of a potential conflict of interest and possible lack of objectivity. The second referral was made nearly seven years later by a psychologist who was concerned about the impact that Zac's then violent behaviour was having on his family as well as his references to dying. The letter referred to the family as 'in crisis'. The SWD were still planning a response when Zac took his own life a week later.

The review was conducted on the basis of a file review. Extracts of the draft report were sent to the SWD and a response that was received from the principal social worker has been taken into account in the final version. The records kept in the SWD were clear and appeared to be contemporaneous and gave a good sense of the approach taken.

Findings

The review team acknowledges the sadness that Zac's untimely death caused to his family and extends their condolences to them, and to all the professionals who worked with him.

The review notes that the SWD had no contact with Zac or his family for a number of years prior to his death. It found, however, that the response to the initial referral about alleged physical abuse of Zac when he was nine years old fell short of standards that would have been expected at the time. The fact that neither Zac nor his father was seen by a social worker meant that the decision to close

the case after very little family contact over a nine month period was not based on any tangible evidence of Zac's current welfare or safety. The SWD had little opportunity to respond to the second referral before Zac's tragic death but it is noted that while the family was described as being 'in crisis', the fact that Zac was not considered at risk from his parents meant that an urgent response was not made. This review raises the question as to whether this is a valid way of assessing risk to a young person whose own behaviour can pose a significant threat to his safety.

Key Learning Points

Three key learning points stand out in this review.

- Firstly, a response to allegations of physical abuse must conform to a basic set of actions. These are outlined in Children First and need not be reiterated here. The response must also take account of less explicit matters, such as the likelihood of denial or minimisation by a parent. Research in the UK (Dale, Green and Fellows, 2002)¹ highlights the importance of avoiding 'compromise', e.g. attempts by parents to negotiate an outcome and warns practitioners to be alert to discrepant explanations. Research in Ireland by Gilchrist (2013)² reiterates some of these issues and also demonstrates the tendency of parents, who have a lot at stake, to give 'partial' explanations. She goes on to identify the uncertainty, denials and lack of information that often leave practitioners feeling like they are working in a vacuum. Importantly, Gilchrist argues that social workers need to be very aware of the way they are conditioned to think positively about parents, particularly those in difficult circumstances, and not allow this to cloud their judgement. These research findings demonstrate the depth of consideration that must be applied to investigations of physical abuse allegations and show the risks inherent in limited or superficial assessments.
- Secondly, the issue of engaging fathers in child protection and welfare work needs particular consideration. Research has noted the tendency for child protection services to deal with women more often than men, and it documents many of the reasons behind this practice. However, the point is frequently made that excluding fathers results not only in partial risk

¹ Dale, P., Green, R., & Fellows, R. (2002) *What Really Happened? Child protection case management of infants with serious injuries and discrepant parental explanations*. London: NSPCC.

² Gilchrist, E. (2013) *What are the issues and challenges facing social workers in assessing cases of non accidental injury?* Demonstration Practice Project for part fulfilment of the Postgraduate Diploma in Child Protection and Welfare, Trinity College Dublin.

assessment but means that fathers as protective influences are under acknowledged. As Scourfield (2006)³ has pointed out, the skills and knowledge needed for engaging men are rarely prioritised in training for child protection staff. Methods for engaging fathers need to be explicitly discussed and worked out in both training and in supervision. While it would not be advisable to have rigid policies about joint child protection interviews (for instance where domestic violence is a factor, consideration needs to be given to interviewing parents separately to prevent escalation of risk), it is vital to actively avoid excluding fathers. Scourfield advises that 'institutionalising' the notion that men should be included would be a first step. The literature advises a range of different approaches from adopting flexible working hours to the use of family welfare conferences but overall, the development of a culture that avoids gendered practice is the first step.

- Child to parent violence (CPV) is increasingly recognised as a form of family violence, although research is at an early stage of development. Declan Coogan, an Irish researcher based at the National University of Ireland, Galway, has published findings related to CPV which show that it is far more than childhood testing of boundaries and has similarities to domestic violence. He points out that it is often hidden because parents find it difficult to acknowledge the issue, fear blame from social workers and often feel that it is their own behaviour that is responsible. Coogan and colleagues have adapted a short term evidence based programme which they call Non Violent Resistance, which has had positive results. Resources for practitioners are available at <https://cpvireland.ie>. The principal social worker in the area where Zac lived has told the NRP that a number of staff members have recently undertaken training in this programme.

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³ Scourfield, J. (2006) The challenge of engaging fathers in the child protection process. *Critical Social Policy*, special issue on gender and child welfare, 26, 2: 440-449