

# Strengthening Practice Through Experience

---

A thematic Child Safeguarding Practice Review  
commissioned by Bolton Safeguarding Children  
Statutory Partners



**Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership**

Helen Martins, Lead Reviewer

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Rapid Review was completed in March 2020 in relation to a young infant who suffered serious non-accidental injuries. The rapid review highlighted areas of practice that required strengthening including professional knowledge and confidence in applying local child protections systems and processes, effective practice with learning disabled parents, the effective assessment of early life trauma on adults and its implications for parenting and the drift and delay in the practice for the infant and what this meant for her daily life. It was agreed from the rapid review that this Child Safeguarding Practice Review (CSPR) would be completed.

The Covid-19 pandemic caused delay to the CSPR being facilitated and during 2020 further Rapid Review's took place; and from this there were emerging themes across Rapid Reviews that have informed the three key themes to be explored in this CSPR.

The purpose of this review was to explore local practice in relation to these three themes with professionals and manager from across the partnership utilising an appreciative inquiry approach to inform key recommendations for systemic local practice improvement.

The themes explored in this review were: -

- Effective Child Protection
- Understanding Families
- Understanding the lived experience of the child

We explored these areas in greater depth with professionals and their managers from across services in Bolton who currently work with children, families and adults. These professionals had been selected by their organisations due to their experience and a main function of their job being to contribute to child protection practice.

We explored with professionals what they thought worked well, what could strengthen practice, their views on what needs to get better in relation to the theme and then develop solutions and ideas with them.

It was found in this review that there were learning points drawn across the themes explored that informed recommendations to be taken forward by the partnership and agencies in Bolton.

The key recommendations formulated from this review are: -

- **Information Sharing** - the Safeguarding Children Partnership develop practitioner guidance and pathways to support effective information sharing across the multi-agency system. The guidance should clarify the different forms information sharing can take, the legal gateways for sharing information and the expected practice principles across the safeguarding children system. The partnership should ensure the effectiveness of this guidance is evaluated within twelve months from launch

- **Child Protection Processes** - The research generated from this review, including that what has been found to work well locally and the highlighted areas of child protection practice that require strengthening should be shared with the Director of Childrens Service in Bolton. This should be used to inform the current review and redevelopment of local child protection processes that is being led by Bolton Children Services. The partnership should ensure the effectiveness of improvement action is evaluated within nine months of implementation.
- **Delivering Best Practice** - The Safeguarding Children Partners should use the research generated from the review as a starting point to create 'best practice principles' for the three themes addressed. Relevant agencies should commit to promoting and embedding the principles into their practice and provide assurance to the partnership of the action they have taken.
- **Working Together** - Within six months of the launch of each set of principles, the partnership should evaluate practitioner's awareness and knowledge of the resources and the extent to which they have impacted on strengthening local practice.

The Safeguarding Children Partnership should: -

- a) Develop and host monthly sessions for the multi-agency workforce, showcasing local services to increase awareness interventions available in the local area for both children and their parents
  - b) Share the learning from this review with Bolton's Early Help Strategic Lead to ensure this informs the revised Early Help Model and strategy; the early help lead will be required to provide a report to the statutory partners on their response to learning and impact of the revised model within twelve months
  - c) The learning from this review to be shared with Bolton's Strategic Lead for the Social Work Practice Model who will be required to provide a report to the statutory partners on the impact of the revised model within twelve months of launch. The Statutory Partners may also want to consider how the model can be adapted to provide a multi-agency practice model
- **Effective Safeguarding Supervision** - The Safeguarding Children Partnership through engagement with statutory partners are to develop a multi-agency framework to support effective safeguarding supervision and core safeguarding induction standards across the system.

## INTRODUCTION

In March 2020 Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership completed a Rapid Review in relation to a young infant who suffered serious non-accidental injuries. During the child's hospital admission further bruising/marks emerged. A CT Scan identified a brain injury, potentially indicative of shaking or strangulation. The Consultant Paediatrician commented at the child protection strategy meeting that the injuries were very recent, probably occurring the same day the infant attended hospital.

While parents provided explanations for some of the injuries, these did not account for the significant harm the infant was subject to. At the time of the harm Children's Social Care were actively involved and the infant was deemed to be a Child in Need. A range of Bolton agencies were supporting the child and their family as part of a multi-agency Child in Need plan. Agencies involved included Bolton NHS Foundation Trust, Greater Manchester Mental Health Foundation Trust, Greater Manchester Police, Children's Social Care, Bolton Council, Bolton at Home, Registered Social Landlord, General Practitioner, Housing Options and Advice Service and the Community Learning Disability Team, Adult Social Care.

Based on the information provided by agencies and analysis undertaken, the Rapid Review Group agreed that a Child Safeguarding Practice Review (CSPR) would be commissioned to identify and respond to any systemic practice issues. The themes identified from practice in this case were: -

- Effective practice with parents, including the assessment and analysis of early life trauma on adults and its implications for parenting
- Knowledge and confidence in applying local child protection systems and processes, including escalation and challenge
- The child's lived experience and the impact of drift or delay

Since the completion of the Rapid Review in March 2020 Covid-19 pandemic restrictions have meant delay in the facilitation of this CSPR. This delay however allowed for the CSPR to respond to emerging themes identified from other Rapid Reviews carried out during 2020.

These highlighted a number of related themes to those identified for this CSPR, including: -

- Poor information exchange between professionals
- Better understanding the child's lived experience,
- Improve understanding and assessment of parental need and associated risk to children
- Strengthen working together arrangements as part of local Child Protection processes

It was therefore agreed with the CSPR Panel and Statutory Partner representatives that a thematic approach would be taken for this CSPR, responding to relevant learning from Rapid Reviews carried out to date. It was agreed the following themes would be explored: -

- **Effective child protection practice;** exploring practitioners knowledge, understanding and confidence in applying local child protection systems and processes, including reflection on escalation and challenge
- **Understanding Families;** exploring how the system supports assessment and analysis of early life trauma on parents and parenting capacity and its impact on relationships within the family network, as well as examining how practitioners assess and respond to parental needs (e.g. Learning Difficulties/Disability, substance misuse, mental health, DAV etc.)
- **Understanding the lived experiences of the child;** in what ways practitioners can better understand and reflect how children see and understand their world when living in a risky environment

The aim of the CSPR is not repeat or revisit what was identified in the Rapid Review's, rather, to explore in more detail where practice is strong in Bolton and where further development is required. In taking this approach, the Statutory Partners are actively seeking system change to reduce the recurrence of similar incidents.

The questions this review sought to answer:

- How can services and professionals work together to ensure effective child protection arrangements that reduce risk?
- How can professionals better understand families and respond to parents' individual needs when we are working together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in Bolton?
- How can professionals ensure that the lived experience of the child is understood so this informs practice to promote their welfare and to keep them safe?

The review has taken a systemic approach to creating solutions. It considers the roles and responsibilities of the practitioner, front line leaders, organisations and the Local Safeguarding Partnership in driving forward change to improve practice and outcomes for children and families locally.

Owing to the demands and challenges of the Coronavirus pandemic, this review has been delayed. Statutory partners noted the particular challenges faced by Bolton in terms of the length of time restrictions have been in place and the severity of these. It would be impossible to carry out any form of learning review without the active participation of multi-agency stakeholders. It has only been with the recent updates to 'Microsoft Teams' and the use of interactive online tools that we have been able to fully engage with stakeholders. A full list of contributing agencies is in Appendix 1.

## **Methodology**

Qualitative methods were used to gather information from front-line professionals and their managers through interactive virtual workshops. Three workshops were held with practitioners, each workshop focused on one practice theme. The fourth workshop was held with front-line managers to share the initial findings from the

practitioner's workshops, seek their views and experiences and their input into the review recommendations.

An appreciative inquiry approach was utilised for this CSPR, underpinning the facilitation of the professionals and managers workshops. As defined by Rose and Barnes (2008) in *Research and Practice* (2014) Practice Tool: 'Appreciative Inquiry in Child Protection' an appreciative inquiry approach encompasses three stages; exploring essential features of participants' experience of existing practice; collectively developing a shared vision of most desirable practice for the future; and working together to develop, design and create this practice.

National guidance issued by the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel recognised the impacts of Covid on review processes and given the restrictions imposed due to Covid-19 at the time of the review, the workshops were held virtually. In preparation for the workshop's participants were given pre-workshop information which included reflective questions on the theme to be explored. During the virtual workshops professionals completed individual questionnaires, took part in small group discussions and used a virtual 'flipchart' to identify system solutions. Professionals who attended the workshops were nominated by their organisations due to their experience in relation to the practice area being explored.

All professionals who participated in the review said they found the experience useful; many found the opportunity for small, multi-agency group discussion valuable to share practice experience and reflect together about their common aim of protecting children and supporting families in Bolton. Professionals enjoyed the methods used in the virtual workshops with some stating they would use these approaches in their organisations. Practitioners especially valued the information shared by others about services and resources in the local community that they were previously unaware of.

Constructive feedback on how future sessions could be strengthened was sought by the reviewer. Practitioners recommended the individual questionnaires be sent out prior to the workshop taking place. This would have allowed them more time to gather their thoughts and seek views from others in their teams/services. This suggestion should be taken forward by the Bolton Safeguarding Children Partnership to support any future practitioner workshop sessions.

### **Parent Perspectives**

Parents were notified of the Rapid Review and CSPR, via letters from the partnership and via the allocated social worker. They have chosen not to contribute to the review at this time.

The Lead Reviewer suggests that as Covid restrictions are eased, children and their families views are sought on their experiences of safeguarding help and support in Bolton. This should further inform the improvement action identified within this report.

## KEY FINDINGS

### Theme 1 - Effective Child Protection

The first key theme explored was effective child protection practice. The question we sought to reflect on is how can services and professionals work together to ensure effective child protection arrangements that reduce risk?

Learning from local rapid reviews demonstrated there was a need to explore local practice focusing on: -

- Engagement of children and parents
- Information sharing
- The child protection plan and the contribution services that support adults that present risk
- Understanding and applying threshold
- Challenge and escalation
- Effectiveness and support of leaders and organisations

The purpose was to explore stakeholders knowledge, understanding and confidence in applying local child protection systems and processes to determine, what they find works well locally in practice and what needs to be strengthened in order to identify recommendations.

#### What works well?

- **Collaborative approaches**

Many professionals shared that being part of a strong multi agency group who 'all sing from the same song sheet' was key to effective child protection practice. One professional said they thought it worked well when big decisions for children were made together. Recalling what this looks like professionals spoke of meeting regularly outside of the conference process, through core groups and this giving them the opportunity to input into the child's plan in a meaningful way, build relationships with other professionals and understand each other's roles.

Virtual meetings have worked well. It has meant that professionals who may well have struggled to attend could now attend and contribute to critical meetings such as strategy meetings.

Professionals also spoke about the importance of having a timely copy of the child's plan and conference minutes, as when they have had these, this has helped them to stay on track with completing the actions allocated to them in the plan. This has also supported them to identify where there may be drift and to offer challenge.



- **Engagement with children and families**

Professionals reflected on when they have been able to engage parents well in the child protection process. They noted that practice works best when they are able to build a rapport with parents and having the skills to hold difficult conversations with them when this is needed.

Professionals spoke about the value of having established working relationships with parents prior to risk escalating. Moreover where a professional who knows the parent well, they are often key in supporting the parent to understand the concerns of other professionals as they arise.

Involving extended family in providing support and being part of the process was identified as playing a critical role in parents engagement. One professional reflected that having the input from wider family in her experience reduced the risk of parents being overly dependent on services and led to more successful, and sustained improvements and outcomes for the child.

- **Applying threshold and timely child protection planning**

Professionals spoke of the 'front door' to Bolton Children Services working well. One professional commented that support was quickly available from the team when they were working with a family with complex issues. There was a consensus across the group that child protection processes in Bolton are effective in the identification of risk and thresholds being applied when there are child protection concerns.

Professionals spoke of their experiences when child protection planning had been timely and effective at preventing drift. They reflected that it worked well when there was an understanding of the parent's capacity to make and sustain change, alongside appropriate interventions being identified and delivered.

Many professional's felt strongly that when they had been able to support children and families earlier, this had a significant impact in ensuring risk did not escalate.

Professionals described this worked best when they felt confident to approach parents if they had any worries, and they gathered parents' consent when sharing information, so they were fully informed and understood what was happening. Professionals also said it worked well when they had a good knowledge of local services to support family's needs and therefore could utilise this quickly.

- **Effective support from managers, organisations and the partnership**

Professionals commented that advice and guidance from their managers supported them to understand and apply thresholds appropriately and consistently. They spoke of the benefits of having managers with a sound understanding of child protection and other relevant safeguarding processes to advise them. Equally, where professionals experienced an organisation that had a strong safeguarding



culture that ensured everyone understood their roles and responsibilities, this gave a strong foundation for effective, confident front-line practice.

One education professional spoke of the electronic system used in their school which enabled teaching staff to report timely safeguarding concerns. The introduction of the system to the school supported staff to become more confident in reporting concerns, provided consistency in how the school responded to safeguarding concerns and enabled, through the use of chronology function, the early identification of child who may need some additional help.

Those who attended, highlighted that there is a good offer of relevant safeguarding and specific topic training for professionals provided by the Safeguarding Children Partnership.

The review was also made aware of weekly learning sessions being held with conference chairs. This is to further develop their leadership role and be a point of contact for multi-agency professionals for advice and guidance on the conference process.

### **What needs to be strengthened?**

From the discussion and reflection, professionals identified a number of key areas where action is needed to further develop and strengthen practice.

- **Information sharing**

The consistency and quality of professional's information sharing with children and families, and each other, was highlighted as an area to be strengthened. Professionals highlighted they are not always informed when things change for a family, such as when a case is stepped down, closes or escalates. Therefore they are not always able to adjust how they continue to support the family.

Professionals spoke of not always being informed when professionals involved with a family change or the family's case is transferred to a new team in Bolton Children Services and in their experience, this has added to drift in the planning for the child and family. Children and families need professionals who consistently understand and apply information sharing procedures effectively. Information and professional views about a parent or their child need to be communicated with them in a sensitive way and face to face wherever possible. They should always be fully consulted about decisions about them.

Professionals need to feel comfortable and confident to explore concerns with parents as they arise, know how to respond when information is shared with them, know and understand issues related to consent and other legal gateways to share safeguarding information. Professionals observed that when parents are not informed about information being shared, this can lead distrust and damage relationships with those already supporting them.

Professionals recognised there is a need to create confidence across the workforce in this area by having a local framework to support information sharing practice. The Lead Reviewer is aware that strengthening local information sharing practice is a current focus for the Safeguarding Children Partnership. It will be important for those leading this work on behalf of the partnership to reflect on findings from this review.

- **A child and family focused child protection process**

Professionals highlighted that there was not always enough time to create the child protection plan collaboratively with parents and others present during conference meetings. In some cases, the meeting focussed too much on discussion and not enough time on understanding the risks and creating solutions. Professionals commented that this led parents to feeling stressed and disengaged by the time the plan was discussed.

Professionals spoke about plans themselves not always being clear enough and that it would be beneficial to reduce the number of actions in plans and focusing these on the main child protection concerns. This would support plans being manageable, more specific and easily measurable. They also suggested that systems to support professionals working together as part of the child protection process could be strengthened. The child's plan and meeting minutes are not shared promptly following meetings, this can lead to delay in actions being undertaken by others and professionals not being clear about what they need to do to help the child and family.

Creating a system that develops a clear plan that can be taken away at the end of the conference would counter delays.

Having consistent report templates to share information for conferences was also highlighted as an idea to strengthen practice. These should prompt professionals to consider the lived experience of the child and analyse the impact of risks. Professionals also suggested that child focused practice would be further strengthened if a child's lived experience was consistently reflected during the conference and was a main feature of the child's plan.

Some professionals spoke about not always meeting regularly enough between conferences. This limited their opportunities to work together, to prevent drift in the child's plan, understand the role of others involved and offer challenge to each other where this is required. Having a consistent understanding of how frequently multi-agency meetings should be taking place and how to escalate concerns within the child protection process would support practice.

It has been identified during this review that the Statutory Safeguarding Partners are currently undertaking an evaluation of local Child Protection arrangements, including children and family's participation, decision making and step-down processes.

The learning from this review should form a core element of this work and inform the development of good practice principles.

- **Helping earlier and the role of the lead professional**

There was strong message from professionals that there is a need to strengthen arrangements to work together across the continuum of need, not only when child protection concerns arise. Professionals consistently commented that effective multi-agency working can support early identification of need and enable support and interventions to be delivered before risk to the child increases.

Professionals reflected about the impact of Covid-19. One key concern that emerged was that they have become unsure about where to go for help, advice or appropriate interventions that can be provided to families at an early help level. Professionals also had mixed experiences regarding using the early help process and recommended that further clarity, support and development around this would be beneficial. They noted the challenges of delivering preventative support within the current Covid limitations. It will therefore be important for multi-agency organisations to ensure face to face services continue to be offered to families and this contact with families progresses in line with the ease to government restrictions.

Professionals recognised a key element for ensuring effective joint working is having a strong lead professional who acts as a main contact for the child or family, co-ordinates activities and interventions, and 'holds' the full picture of the context that is the child's reality. However it was highlighted that agreeing a lead professional can be challenging.

There was a consensus that professionals need to feel confident and supported to take on the Lead Professional role and that having managers who can give advice and guidance to do this when needed is essential.

It was noted that there is currently a re-development of partnership early help processes, a refreshed early help strategy and the development of a strengthened targeted early help offer within the Local Authority. Responding to the views and experiences highlighted by professionals contributing to this review will be vital to inform this development work.

- **Safeguarding supervision and management**

Professionals taking part in the review had mixed experiences of safeguarding supervision. They identified a need to strengthen supervision across services, particularly where child protection is a feature of the professional's role.

Professionals advised that managers did not always have enough child protection experience or understanding of processes to support them effectively as part of the multi-agency team around a child.

Creating multi-agency learning opportunities through reflective partnership audit, joint supervision and networking sessions would further support the development of professionals, their managers and organisations.

While the development of multi-agency safeguarding supervision standards would further strengthen and support effective practice across the partnership consistency and quality of effective support to professionals with this element of their role.

## **Theme 2 - Family and parental individual needs**

Missed opportunities to better understand a parent's individual needs and provide appropriate support was a recurring theme that emerged from the Rapid Reviews completed. Research tells us that good parenting skills and a supportive, stable, and nurturing environment are positively associated with children's development, safety and wellbeing. When parents' individual needs are appropriately identified, assessed, and responded to, there is a significant impact on managing and reducing the risk to the child. Within the review we explored with professionals how they can better understand families and respond to parents' individual needs. The question we sought to reflect on is how can professionals better understand families and respond to parents' individual needs when we are working together to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in Bolton?

As a starting point we asked professionals attending the workshop to identify the most prevalent parental needs they were working with. In order the top answers were: –

- Mental Health
- Domestic Abuse and Violence
- Substance misuse
- Adverse Childhood Experiences, including parents own parenting experiences/experiences of child abuse
- Money management/debt

With the addition of parental learning difficulty/disability, these mirrored the issues from the Rapid Reviews. These were explored in greater depth to better understand current practice strengths and where system improvements are needed.

### **What works well?**

- **Access to training and supervision**

Professionals highlighted that there is good quality training provided by the partnership and individual organisations and this supports their understanding and ability to respond to parental needs. One professional shared that accessing recent partnership training on parental mental health had changed how they engaged and communicated with the parent, taking account of their particular mental health needs. This led to a more open conversation about the parent's needs and how this may impact on their child. The professional also felt more confident in completing a safety plan with the parent. Another professional shared they found the training offered on child exploitation team has been invaluable and greatly informed the support they offered a parent. Professionals also identified that reflective

supervision not only supported them in identifying gaps in their knowledge of parental need, but also supported them to identify how they could fill this gap and where to source tools and resources.

Professionals commented that good communication within their service, such as quarterly service meetings, briefings, networking meetings etc. helped them to keep up to date with local service developments, particularly services that support parents. Services also provided forums to share ideas and strategies with their colleagues about what works when supporting parents.

It was acknowledged that due to Covid-19 networking opportunities have reduced and one of the benefits of attending the review workshops was to re-connect with partners. It will be important for the statutory partners and organisational leaders to ensure that best use is made of technology to maintain workforce connections.

- **Having experience of supporting the need identified**

Many professionals shared that their confidence in supporting parents with individual needs was strengthened by their own experience either in their current role or previous employment. Where they were working frequently with similar issues in their day-to-day work, they were more likely to research good practice and develop their own skills and knowledge. Professionals spoke of having gathered tools over time that they found useful. They shared that tools are more effective when they are visual, engaging and encourage parents to participate in completing them. The Family Strengths Tool used by the family support service was an example shared.

Professionals recognised that there is a wealth of experience and knowledge across the system but that it is not always harnessed. A number of those attending the workshop session were able to make connections with other agencies and share knowledge about services that can help support parents.

A number of professionals commented that having opportunities to meet as a multi-agency group to develop practice on themed areas would be beneficial moving forward.

- **Sharing and accessing information across services**

Professionals highlighted the value in having shared systems across an organisation or someone within the organisation having access to another agency's system. This enables information about parents needs and any changes to circumstance to be quickly identified and responded to. Professionals from Achieve (substance misuse service) talked about their established links with the Community Mental Health Teams and that having access to information supports them to meet parents' mental health needs.

Having key contacts or established relationships with professionals in other services who can be called on for advice, guidance or information was seen as a practice strength. Professionals commented that if they are faced with a need they do not

have knowledge or experience of, and want to know how best to respond, having a key contact or an established relationship within someone in the service makes them feel more confident and less inhibited to ask for help and support. One professional highlighted that being able to speak to a specialist police officer about supporting a parent with domestic abuse was vital in creating a safety plan and putting timely protective measures in place.

- **Having an effective rapport with parents**

There was consensus that professionals needed to be able to build rapport with parents in order to fully understand their needs and be able to respond to these. From their experience professionals found the following worked well to build effective relationships with parents: -

- Using open ended questions and paraphrasing what parents tell you
- Supporting parents to understand you are there to listen and help them
- Addressing practical support needs and strategies for any caring responsibilities, so they have the time and space to address their needs and engage in support offered
- Understanding their adverse experiences, including any negative experiences with services, and exploring this so they can trust and be open to receiving support

One professional from Bolton Childrens Services shared her approach to building rapport with parents,

“Acknowledging the parent’s history, narrative and experiences and how this has impacted on their parenting styles and being mindful that the entrenched behaviour would not change overnight; being able to relay information to the parent in a way that they will understand and show empathy to maximise the professional working relationship”.

### **What needs strengthening?**

Professionals in the workshop, had the opportunity to discuss how practice in this area could be strengthened.

- **The opportunity to regularly network with other multi-agency professionals to receive up to date information of services available and share their own knowledge with others**

Professionals were able to highlight the factors that supported them to feel confident when supporting parents with particular needs, and it was evident that the professionals who participated in the review clearly had expertise in particular areas. However, all professionals were able to identify the parental needs where they felt less confident to respond.

Professionals felt their practice could be further strengthened if there were regular networking events in Bolton.



These events could be a platform for professionals from across the partnership to share their knowledge of how they support parents with specific needs and showcase the tools they find useful. It was also evident that due to the Covid-19 restrictions, some services have changed how they operate, and this is something that could be communicated more widely at networking events.

- **Professionals to have a holistic consideration of parents and family's needs in assessment and the decisions made to provide support**

Professionals shared that a significant number of parents they support are likely to be dealing with a number of complex and at times competing needs that require consideration and support. Research recognises that the link between domestic abuse, substance misuse and poverty are complex and often interdependent, and addressing a single issue will not deal with the underlying cause or other issues present. This means children can be left at risk of short-term solutions that address only the immediate issues or that their lived experience is lost as professionals focus only on parental needs.

Almost all professionals felt there is a need to develop their skills and knowledge in better understanding how parental needs combine to impact on a child's safety and welfare. Professionals felt the development of a local framework to identify and respond to complex and cumulative harm would strengthen and bring consistency to local safeguarding practice.

The reviewer understands that work is underway to implement a Social Work Practice Model and this is being led by Bolton Children Services. It is recommended that the learning from this review is shared with the project lead and that assurance is sought by the Statutory Partners that, following a period of implementation, there is evidence that the model is making a positive impact on outcomes for children. The Statutory Partners may also want to consider how the model can be adapted to provide a multi-agency practice model.

- **Parents with Learning Disability or Difficulty**

The need to better understand and respond to the needs of parents who have a Learning Disability or a Learning Difficulty was highlighted in the Rapid Review. The Rapid Review found that there are potential challenges in working with Learning Disabled parents, getting the balance right between promoting and supporting the needs of the adult parent, not making assumptions about their abilities, capacity and capabilities while at the same time prioritising the needs and timescales required by a developing child.

In the workshop professionals discussed a range of needs prevalent for the parents they support; professionals did not raise supporting Learning-Disabled parents or those with a Learning Difficulty as a prevalent area of their work. However when professionals were asked what needs they would feel less confident to support parents with a number identified this as an area for development. In particular: -



- Understanding the terms and differences between learning difficulty and disability
- Assessing the impact of parental learning disability or difficulty on ability to parent safely and consistently
- Delivering effective help and support that meets the needs of the parents and keeps the child safe.

There is a need to ensure professionals have access to up to date guidance on working with this group of parents that addresses the areas outlined. This should reference useful resources and local services. It was shared by a professional from Bolton Adults Services Learning Disability Team that there is a screening tool that professionals can complete with parents to determine the support they may need.

The development of a best practice guide working with parents should include reference to specific parental needs relating to Learning Disability of Learning Difficulties as well as mental health difficulties and other priority parental needs as identified in this review.

### Theme 3 - The child's lived experience

Learning from local and national Rapid Reviews tells us that the child's voice and an understanding of what life is like for them can be forgotten in practice. Their experiences are not always recorded, analysed, or shared to inform how children are kept safe and how families are supported. Locally Rapid Reviews have demonstrated that there is sometimes a lack of professional curiosity to appreciate a child's lived experience and there are missed opportunities to share their experiences. This limits understanding of what life is like for child, the risk and harm they are experiencing and making evidence-based decisions about what is needed to keep them safe.

Professionals from services that support both adults and children participated in the discussions about the theme; what works well and what can be strengthened. We explored the opportunities they have to speak to a child, gather their views and understand their lived experiences, whether this is verbally, via observation or from information shared by someone who knows them. All the professionals who contributed held valuable insights to the world of the child, either through their direct practice with children or through their practice with parents. The question we sought to reflect on is How can professionals ensure that the lived experience of the child is understood so this informs practice to promote their welfare and to keep them safe?

#### **What works well?**

- **Using the many opportunities to understand the child's world and using**

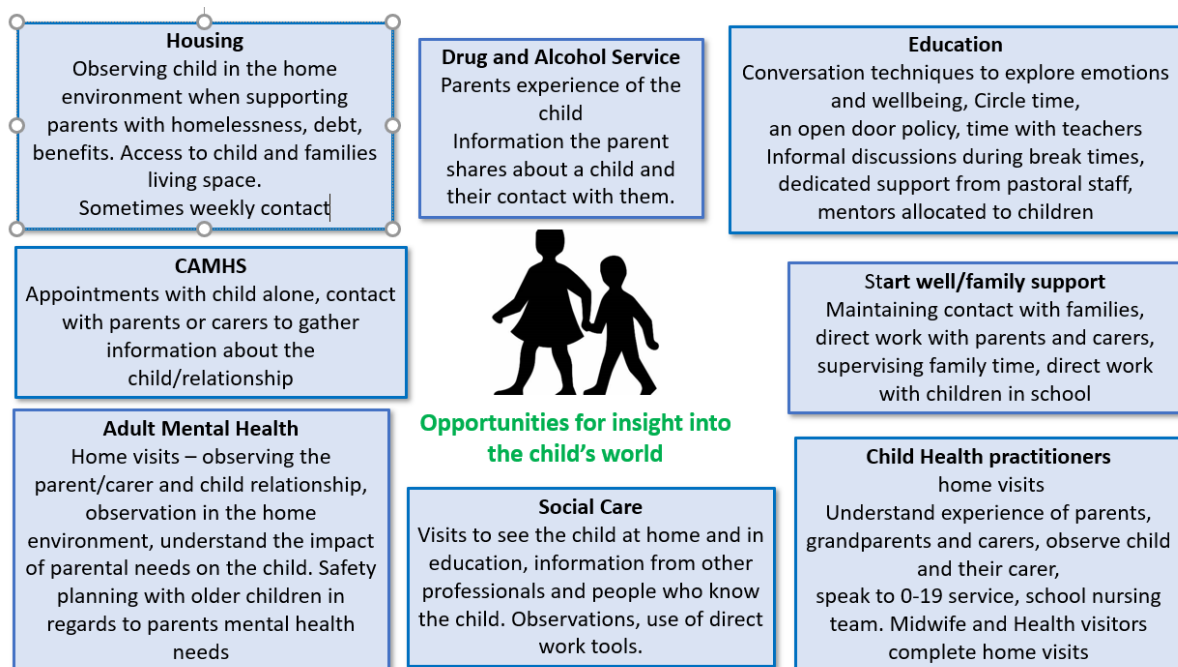
Professionals demonstrated a pro-activeness when it came to discussing how they understand the lived experience of a child. Professionals felt they had a high level of confidence when understanding the lived experience of the child. They also outlined the numerous opportunities they have to understand and explore the lived

experience of a child. This can be found in Figure 1, this is not exhaustive but does demonstrate the numerous, valuable opportunities across the multi-agency system.

Having access to effective tools was emphasised by professionals. The graded care profile assessment tool was highlighted as useful, social care professionals shared insight that they use tools such as ‘a day in the life’ and ‘three houses’, education professionals shared that tutors use a number of ‘checking in strategies’ such as feelings scales and emotions post-its. These tools provide an opportunity for children to talk freely and without pressure about their life at home.

Those taking part in the workshop felt it was essential that where multi-agency meetings are taking place, opportunities are taken to reflect on what professionals know about the child’s lived experience.

Figure 1: Multi-agency opportunities for insight into the world of the child



- **Having a good understanding of child development and the impact risk can have on children**

Some professionals spoke of having an awareness of child development and age-related expectations. They felt this strengthened their judgement in assessing whether to be concerned about a child’s lived experience and whether the care provided is ‘good enough’ or required further assessment, analysis or even escalation. Professionals said having supervision and access to peer perspectives when thinking through the child’s lived experience supported their practice.

- **Being professionally curious and gathering an insight into the parent/carer's experience of the child**

All professions taking part in the review recognised the value of seeking the parents experience and perception of day-to-day life with their child. Having this perspective gives valuable insight into what a parents expectations are, opens the door to explore their own childhood experiences as well as their relationships with their parents and their perceptions of what life is like for their child. Professionals commented that knowing the right questions to ask parents in the right way and being confident to explore difficult topics with them is vital.

Professionals stressed the importance of building a rapport and a relationship with parents as this underpins the ability to gather this insight about family life and dynamics. Professionals spoke of the different techniques they used to engage parents, for example asking the parent to describe how they think their child sees the world, and if the child is an infant asking the parent if your baby could talk, what would they say about their life. They also commented that observations of the parent-child interaction in the home environment are invaluable in understanding the relationship between a child and their parent.

- **Access to advice from managers, colleagues and the multi-agency team around the family**

Professionals spoke of the benefits of having access to guidance and support from others, including the multi-agency team, about their observations of a child, especially where they had limited experience of working directly with children. This supported them to not only make better judgements about the help and support to offer, but also whether there was a need to share information or contact other services. Observing more experienced colleagues in their direct work with children and parents or being mentored in this practice area strengthened their understanding and analysis of a child's lived experience.

Strong supervision and support from managers and safeguarding leads in organisations was identified as vital for professionals to reflect and analyse the child's lived experience. Professionals also felt it was important that newly appointed staff were given opportunities to understand the organisations expectations and approach to safeguarding children through induction.

### **What needs strengthening?**

- **A consistent tool/framework to understand and analyse the child's lived experience**

Professionals highlighted that the development of an interactive tool or framework to understand the child's lived experience would be a useful addition to strengthen working together and enhance professional development. Such a resource would need to be able to meet the needs of families where English is their second language or who may have communication difficulties. Having resources in one place such as the Safeguarding Partnership website would ensure these are easily accessible.

The current development and implementation of the Social Work Practice Model and local Early Help developments, previously referenced, may provide an opportunity to develop such a resource.

It is recommended that the learning from this theme is shared with the relevant project leads, and as a minimum the Statutory Partners seek assurance as to how the learning will be responded to.

- **Professionals being confident to consistently apply and follow local safeguarding arrangements and processes**

Some professionals shared they needed a clearer understanding of local thresholds of and the local services to respond. They shared that it can be a challenge to know when to share information about a child with Children's Social Care and have concerns about getting this right. Professionals spoke of how they fear and worry about the negative impact on their relationships with children and families should they share information at the wrong time or when the threshold for Children's Social Care is not met.

It is therefore a finding in this review that there was an inconsistency across the multi-agency network in the understanding and application of the local Safeguarding Partners threshold document, the 'Framework for Action'. There is need for professionals to consistently understand this essential guidance.

The Bolton Safeguarding Partnership are currently revising their local threshold document, 'Framework for Action' which due to be launched in early summer 2021. The launch of this key document is a key opportunity to respond to the views and experiences shared by professionals in this review.

### **Perspectives of Front-line Leaders**

A workshop was held with managers to consider their views of what works well and what could be strengthened in relation to the three themes explored in this review. There was a correlation between the themes identified by managers and those identified from the workshops with professionals. This provides some assurance that managers understand the challenges faced by their workforce and have a shared view on the solutions that would improve practice.

#### **What Managers think works well?**

- **Effective child protection:** manager's also thought there was prompt identification of risk and application of thresholds for child protection planning and there was a good access to appropriate safeguarding training from their organisation or the Safeguarding Children Partnership. Designated Safeguarding Leads in schools who had access to safeguarding supervision said this works well and managers from Health spoke of internal safeguarding systems that work well when they have concerns about a child.

Managers spoke of having good relationships with other multi-agency professionals and that the Multi Agency Screening and Safeguarding Service (MASSS) are accessible for advice when dealing with complex family issues.

- **Understanding family and parental needs:** managers spoke about the strengths of professional's ability to understand families and parents as individuals and as a whole and that the use of genograms and chronologies supported this in some services. Managers commented that professionals are becoming more aware of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's) when working with parents to understand parents' strengths and limitations. Managers, similar to professionals spoke of strong communication systems in health and education services that facilitate information sharing and a holistic approach to families and constancy of relationships wherever possible.
- **Understanding the child's lived experience:** managers echoed the value of the face-to-face interactions that services continue to have with children and families to understand their lived experience and highlighted tools and approaches that work well including 'a day in the life' tool. Managers commented that the child protection conference and review packs that are available for gathering the voice of the child are strength when used well. Managers shared the view that having a professional who knows the child really well and establishing strong, trusting relationships with children and families are key elements for effective practice.

#### **What Managers think could strengthen practice?**

- The need to strengthen **information sharing processes** including when plans change for children. They noted there can be an inconsistency in multi-agency working arrangements between statutory child protection conferences, sometimes leading to delay in the child's planning and there is a need to ensure conference minutes and the child's plan are shared more promptly among professionals.
- The **value of networking opportunities** across the multi-agency partnership as it can be difficult to have an in-depth knowledge in all areas of need and that it can be challenging for professionals and managers to know what's available and how to access services.
- The **need to strengthen how families are understood in a holistic way**, suggesting assessment and referral processes could be strengthened to support consistent thresholding and decision-making. It is also essential that the needs of all children in the family are considered, even where an assessment or referral may have only been in relation to one child.
- The need to **strengthen tools and approaches** by multi-agency professionals to understand the lived experience of the child, building on existing strengths and improvements. Providing opportunities for the multi-agency system to work together to develop creative approaches to gather and reflect the child's lived experience would be positive, particularly younger children and adolescent whose lived experience and behaviour can be more easily misunderstood.

- Managers were also responsive to the feedback on what is needed from safeguarding **supervision** to strengthen practice in child protection, understanding families and parental needs and the lived experience of the child.

## **LEARNING AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The themes explored during the Child Safeguarding Practice Review have generated a number of solutions that are both interconnected and cross-cutting. Therefore, the recommendations made in this report aim to focus on what can be done systemically to improve safeguarding arrangements and practice across Bolton. Moreover, it is anticipated that these will complement current partnership and single agency improvement plans.

- **Learning point 1 - Information sharing**

A key message throughout this review is the need to strengthen how professionals and their organisations understand their roles and responsibilities when sharing information relating to a child and their family. While areas of strength have been identified in the review, this is not consistent across the multi-agency safeguarding arrangements. Consistency is required in practice; professionals, managers and organisation need to feel confident they understand information sharing processes to ensure any presenting needs or risks can be responded to at the earliest opportunities.

### **Recommendation 1**

The Safeguarding Children Partnership develop practitioner guidance and pathways to support effective information sharing across the multi-agency system. The guidance should clarify the different forms information sharing can take, the legal gateways for sharing information and the expected practice principles across the safeguarding children system. The partnership should ensure the effectiveness of this guidance is evaluated within twelve months from launch.

- **Learning point 2 - The child protection process**

It is evident that professionals understand and apply child protection procedures well, however as the review has identified there are practice areas that require development to further improve how these processes are experienced by children, families, and professionals. Using the learning from this review will increase the likelihood that local processes are effective in reducing risk and are underpinned by principles of best practice.

### **Recommendation 2**

The research generated from this review, including what has been found to work well locally and the highlighted areas of child protection practice that require strengthening should be shared with the Director of Childrens Services in Bolton. This should be used to inform the current review and redevelopment of local child protection processes that is being led by Bolton Children Services. The



partnership should ensure the effectiveness of improvement action is evaluated within nine months of implementation.

- **Learning Point 3 – Delivering Best Practice**

Exploring the three themes with local professionals has demonstrated the wealth of knowledge they hold on what works well in each of the review themes. Sharing this information more widely with all multi-agency professionals through the development of best practice principles would be invaluable in strengthening the local safeguarding culture, creating consistent and effective practice and ultimately improving outcomes from local children.

**Recommendation 3**

The Safeguarding Children Partners should use the research generated from the review as a starting point to create 'best practice principles' for the three themes addressed. Relevant agencies should commit to promoting and embedding the principles into their practice and provide assurance to the partnership of the action they have taken.

Within six months of the launch of each set of principles, the partnership should evaluate practitioner's awareness and knowledge of the resources and the extent to which they have impacted on strengthening local practice.

- **Learning Point 4 – Working together**

This review found there is a need to continue to strengthen working together arrangements, particularly as Covid restrictions are relaxed and there is likely to be an increase in the number of children and families requiring additional support. Professionals identified they had strong productive relationships with each other when they understood each other's roles and responsibilities.

Professionals and managers consistently shared that they need up-to-date information about the services and support available locally for families, particularly where needs may be complex and multi-layered, such as parental learning difficulty/disability, housing needs, mental health difficulties, poverty and debt. However, as demonstrated in the review workshops, where professionals can hear from those who specialise in these areas, this strengthens their awareness of support services and increases their confidence to adopt a more holistic approach to assessment and co-ordinating support.

Professionals need to feel consistently confident to understand how parental needs impact on children's safety and welfare and utilise tools which are widely understood by partners to engage families to understand children's lived experience, to inform them gathering and sharing information when this is needed. This would strengthen and bring consistency to local safeguarding practice.



#### **Recommendation 4**

The Safeguarding Children Partnership should: -

- a) Develop and host bi-monthly sessions for the multi-agency workforce to increase awareness of services and interventions available in the local area, these should prioritise the areas highlighted in this review, i.e. supporting parents with a learning difficulty or disability, money management and debt issues and supporting parents with mental health difficulties
- b) Share the learning from this review with Bolton's Early Help Strategic Lead to ensure this informs the revised Early Help Model and strategy; the early help lead will be required to provide a report to the statutory partners on their response to learning and impact of the revised model within twelve months
- c) The learning from this review to be shared with Bolton's Strategic Lead for the Social Work Practice Model who will be required to provide a report to the statutory partners on their response to learning and impact of the revised model within twelve months. The Statutory Partners may also want to consider how the model can be adapted to provide a multi-agency practice model.

- **Learning point 5 – Effective Safeguarding Supervision**

The review found that consistent support and guidance from frontline managers was essential in creating and sustaining effective practice in safeguarding and supporting children and families. The review found that professionals' experience of effective safeguarding supervision was inconsistent; examples where it was strong for some professionals but not for others. Professionals shared that having managers who understand the complexities they face in practice and give dedicated time to offer reflection and support, strengthened their practice. The best safeguarding supervision focuses on the safeguarding role of professionals, allows for exploration of the lived experience of any children professionals are worried about, ensures that the emotional wellbeing of staff is addressed and that support to promote emotional resilience is effective.

Professionals also identified that where safeguarding children is a feature of their role there should be an induction that prepares them appropriately for their duties and responsibility as a professional contributing to safeguarding arrangements for children in Bolton.

#### **Recommendation 5**

The Safeguarding Children Partnership through engagement with statutory partners are to develop a multi-agency standards to support effective safeguarding supervision and core safeguarding induction standards across the system.

### **Other considerations for future practice development by the partnership**

A practice development theme was highlighted by professionals, which is the need for **available support to parents following the removal of a child from their care** and the value of this support preventing recurring risk to children. Although this learning point was not a direct focus of this review it is a parental need that was highlighted as requiring attention and strengthening in practice. This is for the Bolton Safeguarding Partnership and statutory partners to consider in their future service and practice development.

### Contributors To The Child Safeguarding Practice Review

Over a hundred professionals attended one or more of the workshops and manager sessions. Below is a list of the local organisations whose professionals contributed to the review: -

- Adult Social Care, Bolton Council
- Childrens Service Bolton Council
- Housing Options, Bolton Council
- Bolton at Home
- Bolton Community Housing Partners
- Community Services, Bolton NHS Foundation Trust
- Acute Services, Bolton NHS Foundation Trust
- Greater Manchester Police
- Start Well Services, Bolton Council
- Designated Safeguarding Leads, Primary Sector
- Designated Safeguarding Leads, Secondary Sector
- Adult Mental Health Services, Greater Manchester Mental Health Foundation Trust
- Adult Substance Misuse Services, Greater Manchester Mental Health Foundation Trust

## LEAD REVIEWER AND CSPR PANEL

### Lead Reviewer Statement

I, Helen Martins, am the Lead Reviewer for this Child Safeguarding Practice Review. I have been a qualified Social Worker since 2009 and have extensive experience in Children and Family Social Work. I confirm I have had no direct involvement in the case management or decision making in respect of the infant and their family involved in this review.

### CSPR Panel

Role	Organisation
Detective Sergeant	Greater Manchester Police
Designated Nurse	Bolton Clinical Commissioning Group
Named Nurse	Bolton NHS Foundation Trust
Head of Safeguarding, Community Learning Disability Team	Bolton Council
Head of Service Reviewing, Conferencing and Safeguarding Partnerships	Bolton Council
Interim Head of Community Housing Services	Bolton Council
Safeguarding in Education Team Manager	Bolton Council
Safeguarding Children Lead	Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust
Designated Doctor	Bolton Clinical Commissioning Group