

Media Statement: Thursday 27 July 2017
Graham Bartlett, Independent Chair,
Brighton & Hove Local Safeguarding Children Board

Good morning.

I would like to start by offering my sincere condolences to the family and friends of the young people who we are calling W and X. We're aware their identities are in the public domain but, in line Government legislation, we're not naming them.

Their deaths were a tragedy and our thoughts today are with those who knew and loved them.

I would also like to say the Brighton & Hove Local Safeguarding Children Board fully accepts the findings of this Serious Case Review.

The two young brothers died in Syria in 2014. They were originally from the Middle East/North Africa region, but had been living in the Brighton & Hove area before they went to Syria.

The review covers the period between January 2012 and October 2014. It was led by independent reviewer Edi Carmi and examines multi-agency decision-making, assessments and interventions relating to 'W' and 'X' ahead of them departing the UK.

Whilst the mandatory criteria for a Serious Case Review were not fully met, I felt such an approach would provide a robust framework by which to maximise learning.

This has been a complex and large-scale review and I would like to thank all of those, and there are many, who took the time to contribute.

It has had a major impact on our understanding of the risks of exploitation posed to children, especially through radicalisation.

When they died, the brothers were believed to have been in Syria with the Al-Nusra Front, which in 2013 pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda.

'W' was reported to have died soon after his 18th birthday and his younger brother, 'X' when he was 17.

They had gone to Syria with a friend to join an elder sibling, referred to as 'P' in the Serious Case Review.

I would like to stress that this review has found that, prior to the brothers travelling to Syria, the national intelligence and threat assessment did not suggest that young people were going abroad to fight. Locally, professionals had not identified that the brothers were at risk of radicalisation or at risk of fighting overseas. There was and remains no evidence to indicate how they were radicalised.

The LSCB is not aware of any subsequent cases of young people, under 18, leaving Brighton & Hove to fight overseas.

Many of the findings relate to the challenges for professionals in providing effective help and support to children who have suffered trauma in their early childhood, which can provide the context for children becoming vulnerable to exploitation.

The Serious Case Review examines the experiences of the boys and their family. This includes reports of racist and religiously motivated abuse and attacks, and alleged domestic and physical abuse in Brighton & Hove. It also looks at the youngest four siblings' involvement in anti-social and suspected criminal activities.

A key finding is that professionals do not have effective ways of intervening in families who have suffered long-standing trauma.

Whilst some professionals recognised that the boys' behaviour was indicative of early trauma, and that they needed help to tackle the underlying root causes, they were unable to progress the necessary work and instead found themselves responding to a constant stream of incidents.

The Board understands that difficulties meeting with the boys contributed to challenges in building a relationship with them, as well as allowing for reflective thinking and analysis into the root causes of their issues.

We acknowledge that the way services were delivered to the family, involving many different agencies and practitioners, each responsible for a particular issue, or individual family member, unintentionally became an obstacle to developing a relationship with the family as a whole; building relationships of trust is essential for successful intervention.

As the report states, the dilemma around how to respond to the need to safeguard young people involved in risky behaviour is not restricted to Brighton & Hove, but is common in most areas of the UK.

The Board has looked at whether current strategies for working with young people go far enough in safeguarding those who maybe particularly vulnerable and to prevent them being exploited.

The Board has overseen various steps that have been taken across services to improve responses to this.

These include to protect and support children, identified as being at risk of exploitation into violent extremism.

In 2015, Children's Social Work, at Brighton & Hove City Council, changed their practices with the aim of improving the continuity and consistency of relationships between social workers and families.

The review has heard from representatives of Brighton & Hove's Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic community about how children can be better protected from exploitation into radicalisation.

However, the report highlights that considerable work remains in developing more effective partnership working between statutory agencies and community representatives. Reflections on this are explored more fully in the report and form the basis of key findings.

We are clear that groups should not just be consulted by policy-makers, but really have their voices heard, understood and taken into account in a variety of ways.

To this end, we are focusing our efforts, in collaboration with the Community Safety Team, on improving links with local minority ethnic and faith community groups.

Consistent and appropriate collation and sharing of information is a regular theme in serious case reviews and, once again, here agencies have been found wanting.

This Serious Case Review questions the effectiveness of information sharing about young people who come to police attention. This was attributed to a Sussex Police systems issue which, at the time under review, prevented the full details of alleged criminal involvement being fully shared. This led to professionals having different views and perceptions about the extent and range of the boys' suspected criminality and therefore their vulnerability.

Information sharing systems within Sussex Police have since been reconfigured and the arrangements within the Youth Offending Service have now improved, but the Board continues to seek assurances that changes are embedded and have improved sharing capabilities between partners.

While the review has not found any significant information sharing weaknesses between counter terrorism officers and safeguarding agencies it does stress that there is a perception that counter-terrorism police have insufficient understanding and experience of safeguarding to fully understand their role in child protection procedures.

The wider context of potential child neglect among young people was evidently not considered. Had it have been, then it is possible that services may have been able to intervene in different ways.

On exploitation, the review emphasises an underlying challenge for practitioners and parents in identifying young people at risk, and knowing how to counter the influence of propaganda they are exposed to on the internet and through social networks.

We recognise that with the arrival of online risks, it's increasingly difficult for parents and professionals to keep track of what is influencing children. In response to this review, and others, the Board has already developed training to improve understanding amongst professionals about the different elements of social media in terms of its impact, messages, sites and changing format.

We will also be working to boost awareness amongst children and young people about how to stay safe online.

The Board wants to see a city-wide campaign, highlighting the risk of exploitation and online grooming into radicalisation, to help potential victims protect themselves from exploitation.

This review has highlighted that children who go missing abroad are not subject to the same child protection processes as those who disappear in the UK, leaving the investigation to just the police and the authorities where the child is suspected of being.

This is of concern to the Board, as it is recognised that this could lead to a potential loss of both information and opportunities to protect children.

We will be contacting Central Government to highlight this issue and to help find ways to resolve this.

On balance, I should highlight that this review finds a 'striking' response following the discovery that the two boys and another young person had gone missing. It recognises very positive changes to processes, practice and working relationships to help prevent other young people at risk of radicalisation.

We are assured that this is a sign of how well services in Brighton & Hove come together when risks are identified.

The safeguarding risk of UK children going abroad to fight in a war was only recognised after these events, and the Board is faced with the task of establishing how best to protect children in this new global context, bearing in mind there is no single root of radicalisation.

Whilst there have been considerable developments of children's social work services, including for adolescents, in Brighton & Hove I recognise there are still further improvements to be made. Some of these are set out as our Actions in the Board's response to this review.

To conclude, the Brighton & Hove Local Safeguarding Children Board is committed to taking the learning forward to safeguard children. I also hope the findings will inform policies and practices elsewhere in the UK. Thank you.



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