

Learning from Child Safeguarding Practice Review: Jacob

Background and introduction to review

This Child Safeguarding Practice Review was commissioned by Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board (OSCB) following a serious incident notification and rapid review of Jacob, a 16-year old boy who was found dead in his bedroom. The Coroner Report recorded Jacob was intoxicated and distressed, with insufficient evidence that he had intended to end his life.

From July 2017 to April 2019 the Review analyses how Jacob was groomed into a world where he was criminally exploited and exposed to serious levels of youth violence.

The review concludes that Jacob was significantly harmed in the months prior to his death and felt trapped in a world he could not escape, having been coerced and controlled for many months by organised criminals operating County Lines.

Jacob's family wanted to tell his story along with influencing and affecting change across the safeguarding system in the UK. Our final thoughts are with Jacob and his family whose lives were forever changed by those who chose to exploit him.

Key findings:

In summary the main issues found in this review were:

- **Criminal exploitation**
 - Jacob was known well by key professionals who tried their best to help him but often they did not know how
 - The knowledge, skill and safeguarding systems to identify and respond to criminal exploitation was at times limited and not consistently applied across agencies
 - The network focused on Jacob's range of behaviours and did not focus well enough on disrupting the risks to Jacob while in the community
- **Education**
 - Jacob was let down by the education system which did not place him in a provision that could meet his educational, social and emotional needs
- **Working Together**
 - The provision of local and national services was limited and not able to respond to the risks quickly enough to keep Jacob safe
 - There was a difference of opinion about how to respond to risks and this did not lead to change for Jacob
 - The system was fragmented with some key agencies working together and other partners noticeably missing

Themes in common with other Oxfordshire case reviews:

- The role of education settings in keeping children safe
- Understanding the risk factors and predictability when working with child exploitation
- Use of escalation where risks are not reducing, despite interventions from specialist support
- Missing role of housing in the safeguarding network

The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2020) report [“It was hard to escape: Safeguarding Children from Criminal Exploitation”](#) examines the findings and learning from practice reviews involving 21 children, from 17 different Local Authorities where a child either died or was seriously harmed owing to criminal exploitation.

This report, the [Serious Case Review ‘Chris’ Newham SCB August 2018](#), [Serious Case Review for ‘Child C’ Waltham Forest May 2020](#), and the [Serious Case Review for ‘Child C’ City and Hackney December 2020](#) draw a number of findings and key learning points in common with Jacob’s story, including how reachable moments are seen and acted upon, the importance of children attending school and how exclusions are seen as a trigger point for risk of serious harm.

Strengths in practice

- There were practitioners who knew Jacob well, saw him often and had built a relationship of trust with him in that he would seek out their support. They worked flexibly and creatively, and took considerable time, skill and persistence in their care for Jacob
- Practitioners had obtained Jacob’s views, wishes and feelings on several occasions by spending 1:1 time with him
- Some of the warning indicators to Jacob’s safety and well-being outlined above were regularly shared between the statutory agencies, risk assessed by individual agencies and plans were established within their own assessment frameworks
- Numerous attempts were made, and meetings held, to try to secure an appropriate home which would keep Jacob safe and offer therapeutic interventions to help address trauma, specifically with criminal exploitation or gang specialisms

Learning Points for practitioners

- Be aware of unconscious gender bias when working with children who are groomed, coerced and controlled into committing crime as victims of exploitation. Research shows some evidence with males tending to be perceived as perpetrators while females are perceived as victims
- Look beyond behaviours to understand need and be aware that the use of overly emotive language can affect how risk is seen
- Know the risk factors and predictability. Use all available tools, especially the [Child Exploitation Screening Tool](#) to help identify possible risks of exploitation, e.g. poverty, abuse, neglect, school exclusions and use [chronologies](#) to record significant events and changes in a child’s life. Where there are repeated missing episodes and concerns regarding exploitation a referral should be made to the **Children Missing or Exploited Panel**
- Consider the where there are differences of opinion
- Where ‘normal processes’ have not made sufficient progress to reduce risk and secure improved outcomes, consider referral to the [Complex Child Panel](#)
- Act on those critical and reachable moments in a child’s life, e.g. when a child is excluded from school, when they are injured or arrested. Adopting a flexible and responsive approach in the critical moment in a child’s life can have a powerful influence on the direction taken after the event and after conversations have happened

Learning points for managers

Escalation: if risks are not reducing, despite interventions from specialist support, escalate to senior managers and directors where appropriate. Refer to the [Resolving Professional concerns](#) where appropriate, [Complex Child Panel](#) according to criteria met and/or IRO Dispute Resolution Process. Check your teams know how to escalate concerns

- **Analysis and management of risk:** promote the use of available tools in your teams, see [OSCB Multi-agency toolkit](#). Ensure practitioners are trained in responding to extra-familial harm, contextual safeguarding and trauma-based approaches, are sharing information routinely and are professionally curious to consider what lies beneath children's behaviours and needs. Multi-agency risk strategies, plans and interventions, must be well coordinated, SMART and evidence based

Jacob's family think the most significant learning in his short life is for professionals to act swiftly on the opportunities to ensure children are safe and for children to be engaged in an educational setting each day so that their time is filled. Their hope is that by telling Jacob's story things will change for other children at similar risk.

Key messages for the safeguarding system

- **Education**
Systemic and enduring drift and delay across the education sector and lack of responsibility and accountability in the education department, resulted in Jacob being without an education provision for almost 2 years. Previous reviews have commented on the importance of the role of education in keeping children safe and how exclusions are seen as a trigger point for risk of serious harm. Where a child's education needs are not being met due to schools refusing to accept a child, matters should be referred to the Education Skills and Funding Agency and the Secretary of State can provide direction
- **Community Safety Partnership**
Develop and promote the Community Safety Partnership across the network to ensure pathways are clear and known to all agencies working with children and families, and that local information/knowledge and data is routinely shared and results in community safety actions being put in place
- **Police disruption and of YJS interventions**
Build on the current framework and written guidance offered by Oxford City Local Police Area to develop consistent, effective police activities and strategies to identify, disrupt or stop those adults/organised crime groups exploiting children and to see the children involved through the lens of safeguarding. This requires a joined-up approach across the network to recognise and respond to environmental and extra-familial risks to children and young people within their own and wider communities
- **NRM**
Raise awareness of the National Referral Mechanism Framework and referral process across the network to increase local knowledge, understanding and use
- **Work with parents/carers in tackling criminal exploitation**
Consider the work of SPACE (Stop and Prevent Adolescent Criminal Exploitation) and the National Parents as Partners (NPIES) forums when developing more effective systems and strategies when working with parents/carer in tackling criminal exploitation

National learning from this review

National bodies and partner agencies to acknowledge and share the key learning and findings from Jacob's Review (along with other recent Reviews) so as to inform national policy and practice.

- **National Panel:** Consider the effectiveness of the NRM in making a difference to children's lives
- **Department for Education:** Provide feedback on the effectiveness of the Education and Skills Funding Agency process in resolving issues in a timely manner, and statute and guidance for local areas on how to manage Governance arrangements with academy run schools and local education departments who cannot currently be mandated to accept children on roll

- **DFE:** Undertake a review of national placement sufficiency for children who need to be in care or placed under secure arrangements

If you do one thing.....

Share information across the network and where there are differences of opinion, escalate appropriately, and following the relevant procedure.

Did you know? The following links offer useful further information and guidance:

- ✓ Oxfordshire's [Child Exploitation Screening Tool](#) is designed to help identify possible risks of exploitation and should be used where there are such concerns about any child/ren
- ✓ [Safeguarding Children at Risk of Exploitation](#) outlines the partnership responses and provisions for the effective safeguarding of all children being or at risk of exploitation in Oxfordshire
- ✓ Further resources and guidance are available on the following OSCB themed webpages:
 - [Child Exploitation and Modern Slavery](#)
 - [Child Criminal Exploitation](#)
 - [Modern Slavery and Exploitation](#)
- ✓ And via the following websites:
 - [Contextual Safeguarding Network](#)
 - Home Office: [Modern Slavery: Statutory Guidance for England and Wales \(under s49 of the Modern Slavery Act 2015\)](#) guidance on the National Referral Mechanism

What has changed since:

Youth Justice and Exploitation Service

Oxfordshire's Specialist Child Sexual Exploitation and Youth Justice teams have come together to create a new Youth Justice and Exploitation service working alongside the Violence and Vulnerability Unit across the County. This service hopes to embed Contextual Safeguarding approaches.

Staff Training

Learning events and training have been delivered on Child Drug Exploitation and Exploitation Violence and Vulnerability and the OSCB 2019 Annual Conference was on Contextual Safeguarding. A series of briefings took place Countywide to raise awareness of the Exploitation Screening Tool and to set out the pathway for Children at Risk of Exploitation in Oxfordshire.

Joint Decision-Making

There is now an established Joint Decision-Making Panel held by the Police and Youth Justice Service to assess suitability for out of court disposals and screening for safeguarding concerns.

Response to placement sufficiency

In response to the issue of placement sufficiency for children with a complexity of needs, Oxfordshire initiated and now are collaborating in the South-East region in working with the Independent Children's Homes Association with trying to generate an improved market whilst also looking at the gaps in provisions and highlighting this at a Government level.

Education

Oxfordshire now has a Children Missing Education Policy which clearly spells out its commitments to ensure children receive suitable full-time education.

Dispute Resolution

The [Resolving professional concerns](#) was updated in March 2023 clarify the process for resolving professional disagreements between agencies. [The IRO Resolution and Escalation Process](#) was updated in Dec 2019 to provide greater focus and transparency of IRO oversight and tracking of themes.