



The Role of Children's Social Care in the Management of Unexpected Childhood Deaths

Children's social care services play an important role in responding to an unexpected child death. As part of the multi-agency team, they will contribute to the gathering and interpreting of information to establish the cause and circumstances of death, and may become involved in providing support to the bereaved family. In addition, children's services authorities have a specific remit to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need in their area, and to make enquiries where they have reason to suspect that a child is suffering or likely to suffer, significant harm.

Responsibilities of children's social care services

When a child dies suddenly or unexpectedly, children's social care services must consider whether immediate further investigation is required to safeguard the welfare of siblings or other children in the household.

On notification of an unexpected child death, a social worker should check the children's social care records and ascertain what information is known, or involvement there has been with the deceased child, his siblings or the family and must consider whether:

- There is family referral history on children's social care records;
- There has been contact with any adult social care services;
- There is any relevant information from educational and other local authority children's services relating to the child or family;
- The child or the family are known to other children's voluntary or community organisations.

Relevant managers within children's social care will need to be informed if the child and/or family are known to children's social care (open or closed case), or if the child was in the care of approved foster carers, care staff, school staff or registered childminders at the time of death. Local Safeguarding Children Boards should develop operational procedures to ensure the correct people are notified. These should be cross referenced to the child protection procedures.

The responsible manager should liaise with the lead paediatrician and attend the multi-agency information sharing and planning meeting. In most situations, where the death is presumed to be from natural causes and there are no suspicious

circumstances, the health team will take the lead in the ongoing management of the case. Children's social care staff should co-operate with the coroner and health staff to ensure all relevant information is reviewed. Where there has been any involvement of children's social care, either prior to, or in response to, the child's death, the relevant staff members should attend the final case discussion to help review the information and consider any ongoing support needs of the family.

Children's social care may play a significant role in helping support the bereaved family, particularly where they are judged to be a family in need, or where the welfare of other children in the family may be compromised following the death.

Responsibilities of children's social care services where there are suspicious circumstances

At any stage of the rapid response process, concerns may come to light indicating that the deceased child may have been subject to abuse or neglect, or that there may be a risk of harm to other children. In such cases the responsible manager should convene a section 47 strategy meeting at the earliest possibility. Any child protection enquiry planned by the strategy meeting must be conducted within the framework of the local child protection procedures. The manager dealing with the case should consider the need to secure records at an early stage.

Any child protection enquiries in respect of the death of a child will be led by the police as a major crime investigation. Children's social care staff should co-operate with the police to ensure their investigation is carried out effectively. Children's social care will take responsibility for considering the welfare needs of any siblings or other children who may be deemed at risk.

In all circumstances where there is evidence of maltreatment contributing to the death of a child, the case should be referred to the chair of the Local Safeguarding Children Board for consideration of the need for a Serious Case Review. Procedures for notifying the Director of Children's Services, OFSTED and CSCI should be followed.