



The role of the Police when investigating an unexpected childhood death is:

- To support the family during the very distressing time following their child's death.
- The protection of life, i.e. responsibilities to safeguard other siblings in the event of abuse or neglect.
- To assess whether or not any criminal offences may have taken place and work with the Crown Prosecution Service in cases involving potential prosecution of offenders.
- To work with partner agencies in establishing how and why the child died.

Police response should be in accordance with the ACPO/NPIA Guidelines contained within the Murder Investigation Manual CDROM supplementary material.

Whilst the majority of childhood deaths are natural, a proportion are caused deliberately by violence or by maliciously administered substances, whilst others may be, at least in part, attributable to negligent parenting. The difficulty faced by the Police in SUDC investigation is to reconcile the traditional criminal investigation approach with the knowledge that the majority of these incidents do not involve a criminal act. The Rapid Response process aims to enable the multi-agency team to secure and preserve information and evidence, whilst providing a sensitive and caring service to the bereaved family.

If, at any point in the process, suspicion is raised that the child may have been murdered, the standard SUDC approach should cease and a murder investigation should commence. Adopting a joint agency approach from the start enables this to take place at any stage and allows the Officer in overall charge of the investigation (OIOC) to draw on the strengths of the multiagency team in contributing information, assisting with the investigation, and supporting the family. In all cases, irrespective of whether the cause of death appears to involve a criminal act, the Police can play a significant role in supporting the multi-agency investigation.

Initial action

In most cases, the police will receive a call that the Ambulance Service has already taken the child to the Emergency Department and that resuscitation was unsuccessful. Police Call Takers must have clear and unambiguous instructions about the correct deployment in such cases.

When a call is received by the police that an infant has been found lifeless, and has not been transferred to the Emergency Department, the first officers to be despatched to the incident will often be uniform officers with little or no expertise in SUDC investigation. These first responders will be responsible for initiating the police response and taking immediate steps to meet the objectives outlined above.

Duties of first responders

- If the Police are the first professionals to attend the scene ahead of Ambulance staff, urgent medical assistance should be requested as the first priority.
- Upon initial attendance officers should take note of the environment in which the child was found, including noting the position and appearance of the child, which persons were present, the temperature of the room, any obvious hazards, and any signs of negligent care.
- Ensure that an appropriate Detective Inspector is notified and attends as soon as possible.

Unexpected child deaths must be allocated as soon as possible to an accredited officer, who must retain overall responsibility for the investigation. In all cases of sudden unexpected childhood deaths, whether or not there are any obvious suspicious circumstances, a detective officer of at least Inspector rank should be tasked to immediately attend the Emergency Department and take charge of the investigation. Normally this officer will be accredited at PIP level 3 and registered as a Senior Investigating Officer (SIO). In most circumstances it would be appropriate for this officer to be a member of the Child Abuse investigation Unit/ Child Protection Team.

Immediate duties of the Officer in overall charge of the case:

- Instigate police database checks on child and family members
- If deceased is already at Hospital, deploy a Detective Sergeant to location where discovery of the child took place (usually home address) to carry out an initial assessment.
- Notify Coroner's Officer
- Call out CAIU Family Liaison Officer
- Ensure environment where the child died is identified and preserved for later forensic assessment, where necessary, by a forensic investigator, photographed and video recorded.
- Where there is any suggestion of overlaying or neglect, request blood samples from carers for alcohol/drug examination. In doing so, consideration should be given to the status of the carers, and issues around consent. The rationale behind any decisions must be recorded.
- Liaise with Duty Paediatrician or designated SUDI doctor
- Ensure full skeletal survey by a paediatric radiologist is carried out and that results are available for the pathologist
- Obtain history details from family in conjunction with the Paediatrician
- Police attendance should be kept to the minimum. Visiting officers, so far as possible, should not be in uniform, and should not arrive in marked cars.

Scene Preservation

Scene 1: The home address/location where the child was prior to death.

The home address or location where the child was found needs to be preserved to ensure a home visit can be undertaken by the OIOC together with a senior health professional (usually the responsible Paediatrician). The visit should be completed within 24hrs of the SUDC process commencing. The primary reason for a home visit is to establish whether factors at the home address may have contributed to the child's death and this should be effectively communicated to the child's parents. The OIOC should arrange for a Forensic Investigator to attend the scene, either prior to or at the same time as the joint home visit in order to obtain appropriate photographic or video recordings along with other observations of the environment in which the child died. (see Information Sheet: the home visit).

It is important that officers secure the home address in a discreet manner, i.e. a plain clothes officer in a plain vehicle placed at the address or family members leave the address and the premises are secured pending a home visit.

Scene 2: The child.

The child will normally be taken by ambulance to the Emergency Department of the receiving hospital.

Whenever possible, and particularly in suspicious cases, a police officer should be present during the examination of the child, and should note the condition of the child, including hygiene, and any injuries or other findings reported by the medical staff. Police officers should work with the medical staff to ensure an appropriate chain of evidence when samples are taken for forensic purposes. Normally the clothing should remain with the child; however when clothing, nappies or equipment has been removed from the child, this should be separately bagged. The parents should be informed of any items that have been removed, and what will happen to them.

In most circumstances, the family should be allowed to spend time with their child, with a member of staff present to supervise. The parents should be allowed to hold their child, and the family or health staff should be allowed to take photographs or mementos. These rarely interfere with any evidence gathering. If there are suspicious findings, a police photographer should take photographs of the body before the family is allowed to hold him/her.

The role of the Officer in Overall Charge of the Case / Senior Investigating Officer.

A Detective Inspector (preferably from the Child Abuse Investigation Team) will attend the scene as soon as possible, and will become the Officer in Overall Charge of the Case (OIOC).

After making the necessary arrangements for scene preservation, the OIOC will liaise with the Responsible Paediatrician at the hospital and other agencies to ensure that the SUDC protocol is actioned. Where appropriate, a Family Liaison Officer will be appointed.

Unless the death is viewed as suspicious a full history can be taken from the parents jointly by a paediatrician and a police officer. This may be taken initially in hospital and supplemented at the home visit. Under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, if there are significant suspicions that the death may be unnatural, the law demands that the suspect's rights are protected and certain legal restrictions apply in terms of the way in which people are questioned and evidence secured/preserved. In the event of the death being suspicious the OIOC will decide upon the appropriate course of action, which may include the arrest of a suspect.

In those circumstances when the death is suspicious, a forensic Home Office Pathologist should conduct a joint post-mortem with a Paediatric Pathologist. If a forensic post mortem is undertaken the OIOC and Forensics Officer will attend. Following the immediate responses, the OIOC should continue to liaise with the Coroner's Officer, pathologist, paediatrician and other involved professionals, to ensure information is appropriately shared, and the family is kept informed.

An initial information sharing meeting should be convened within 24 hours of the death involving all relevant police, health and social care professionals. This enables information to be shared between all relevant agencies, and for the ongoing management to be carried out in a planned manner. If any child protection concerns are identified, this meeting should continue as a formal strategy meeting under S47 of the Children Act 1989. The meeting will also consider information relating to any potential criminal acts and agree the conduct and timing of any criminal investigation.

As soon as possible, usually 8-12 weeks after the child's death a multi-agency case review meeting will be held. The main purposes of this meeting are to establish where possible the cause of the child's death and any contributory factors; to plan for any ongoing care of the family; and to support and debrief all professionals involved in responding to the death. The police team should always attend this meeting, even when there has not been a criminal investigation, so as to contribute to appropriate information sharing and joint working. If the death is subject of an ongoing criminal investigation, no such meeting should be held without the Police first seeking the views of The Crown Prosecution Service as to how and when the meeting should be held, what information may be shared and how the discussion should be recorded.