

TITLE OF REPORT: Tackling Toxic Trio

REPORT OF: Elaine Devaney – Service Director Children and Families

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report describes a current case which is open to a social worker in the Safeguarding and Care Planning Service. It follows the story of two children and describes the intervention of Children's Social Care in the children's lives. It seeks to inform the Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee about the impact of parental mental health, drug misuse and domestic abuse on the lives of children we safeguard in Gateshead and seeks the views of committee members on this or future planned approaches.

Tackling Toxic Trio

The names of family members have been changed to protect their identity and comply with data protection requirements.

Case Study – 'John and Mary'

1. John and Mary are the children of Mr Tim Hands and Ms Kate Smith. They are aged 8 and 1 year respectively. Mr Hands and Ms Smith have two older children together, Elizabeth and Tim who are adults. There have been concerns about Elizabeth, Tim and John's poor school attendance. Mr Hands and Ms Smith are understood to have an unstable relationship, with domestic violence being a feature and concerns that both parents abuse alcohol. Previous concerns include police call-outs for arguments and aggressive behaviour within the family home.
2. The children's father, Tim has been in prison several times. When he is not in prison he lives with his brother and he is living with his brother currently. He was most recently released from prison in July 2018. His imprisonment on that occasion was for smuggling drugs into prison for his brother. Previous offences have included robbery and ram-raiding.
3. The Local Authority believe John and Mary will suffer significant harm, should they return to the care of Ms Smith. Both children are currently in a foster placement together. The basic needs of the children were not being met, including John's health and educational needs and the housing needs of both children. The creation of a child protection plan to support John and Mary in the care of Ms Smith was not successful as the same concerns persisted, despite social work intervention.

4. Ms Smith currently does not have an address from which she can safely care for the children, the conditions of her current property have been observed as being so poor it was not safe for the children to be present at any time in the property.

5. The Local Authority has had enduring concerns regarding Ms Smith's often erratic and troubling presentation, raising suspicions of substance misuse or poor mental health. Because of Ms Smith's poor engagement, it has not been possible to truly determine why Ms Smith presents this way. Ms Smith has refused any support or intervention around her emotional health.

PRECIPITATING EVENTS

6. A Legal Gateway Meeting took place on 22 February 2018, due to concerns that Ms Smith was not engaging with the Child Protection Plan. Additionally, despite obtaining a new tenancy, she was once again at risk of eviction due to non-payment of rent. John needed 10 dental extractions; he had done so for over a year, but Ms Smith did not take him for appointments. John was observed to be in pain and in school would choose softer foods. Transport was provided by the Local Authority to help Ms Smith and John travel to the appointments, but Ms Smith did not take up this offer of help. John's attendance at school had deteriorated further and he was not brought to school for four weeks prior to the meeting.

7. Access into the property and visits to the children were not always guaranteed, with visits often coordinated with the help of Housing Services or Police.

8. The Legal Gateway Meeting concluded that a Letter Before Proceedings meeting should be held, with timescales set with Ms Smith to engage with assessments and intervention required to safeguard the children.

9. Following the Legal Gateway Meeting, a home visit took place on 26 February 2018 with an Environmental Health Officer, Ms Smith had reported that there was no heating or hot water to the property and the toilet was blocked. Ms Smith refused access to the property and was advised that the Police would be called; Ms Smith then left the property, handing her keys over to the Police to allow them to enter. Photographs were taken by a Housing Officer which illustrated the deplorable home conditions. There was an accumulation of rubbish, no bedding for the children, faeces in a washing bowl on the floor and the toilet was overflowing with faeces. Arrangements were made for Ms Smith and the children to stay at her mother's house.

10. Ms Smith did not attend for her planned Letter Before Proceedings meeting on three occasions. Because of her disengagement and no improvement in the children's housing situation, John's dental needs being neglected and very poor school attendance, a decision was made for care proceedings to be issued.

11. A Child Concern Notification was then sent by the Police. A member of the public had reported Ms Smith and the children being asleep in the garden of her mother's property, during the night in March. Police visited and considered Ms Smith to be intoxicated, which she denied. Ms Smith advised she was locked out and had been unable to wake her mother. John had a scratch to his face. Ms Smith was dismissive of the concerns, citing that her children were safe in the garden as she 'knew people in the area'. Ms Smith demonstrated a total lack of regard for the children's safety as well as their physical health.

12. Ms Smith then went missing with the children. A report was made to Northumbria Police who made attempts to locate the family, including circulation of Ms Smith's details on social media.

13. At 8.30am the following day, the children and Ms Smith were found in a local garden. John informed social workers that he and his mother and baby sister had stayed out all night. Ms Smith was challenging and abusive to Police in the presence of the children, she was arrested on suspicion of child neglect and was held at Forth Banks Police Station. Because of the concerns, Police exercised their powers of protection and the children were brought to the Civic Centre.

14. Both children were observed to be very cold and wet; John could not tell us when he last ate. Whilst the children had coats on, John only had a t-shirt underneath and no socks. The Local Authority requested a medical examination of the children, as they had stayed out overnight when it was very cold and raining. The Consultant Paediatrician reported the primary need for the children was for warmth and safety.

15. John later informed social workers that his mother got a quilt from 'Nana's' to enable them to sleep outside. This raised concern about maternal grandma's endorsement of Ms Smith's actions.

16. John and Mary both have additional unmet health needs, in the form of their outstanding immunisations. Mary is a baby of just one year, her own health and development has not been safely promoted, she did not receive adequate antenatal health care. There is a concern that Mary may have Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder.

17. John has been exposed to domestic violence between his parents, there have been continued challenges in engaging Mr Hands so that meaningful understanding of his parenting function can be gained. Records do suggest he has a dependency to abuse alcohol and this will impact on his capacity to care for the children.

18. Ms Smith has demonstrated erratic and challenging behaviour in the presence of the children, she has become volatile and aggressive illustrating little regard for the children's welfare. On those occasions, neither child has responded to their mother's behaviour, which does suggest they see this as 'normal'.

19. The reasons for Ms Smith being unable to engage with services or to follow any previously agreed plans largely remains unknown, although her presentation and behaviour has led professionals to believe she is misusing alcohol or other substances. Ms Smith can struggle greatly to regulate her emotions. The neglectful, inconsistent responses of Ms Smith towards the children, as well as their exposure to her aggressive and challenging behaviour highlights they are unlikely to be able to feel safe and secure in her care. Ms Smith's mother has reported that Kate has been sleeping rough on the estate. Kate's mental health deteriorated in July 2018, illustrated by shouting, behaving bizarrely and reportedly hallucinating. At this time she was living with her mother. The mental health crisis team attempted to assess her needs on three occasions, but she refused to engage with them; during one attempted visit she jumped out of a window to evade them.

20. The Local Authority has now issued care proceedings to secure the care of the children in the long-term. The children's father is currently being assessed as a carer for the children by an independent social worker at the request of the Court. The children's mother has disengaged from the Court process.

21. As part of the care proceedings a toxicology test was carried out which revealed a high level of alcohol use and use of amphetamines by the children's mother.

22. In July 2018, Ms Smith was arrested for assaulting a police officer. Upon her arrest she was found to be carrying amphetamines and an offensive weapon (a saw) in her handbag.

23. There is a final Court hearing in December. The Local Authority plan is for the children to live with their maternal aunt who lives outside of the Gateshead Council boundary. It is hoped that maternal aunt will be granted a Special Guardianship Order and thus have parental responsibility for the children. Maternal aunt and her partner already have SGO's for her partner's two grandchildren, as a result of those children being neglected by their parents.

24. An anonymous call was received in October 2018 informing that Tim, the children's father had moved Kate, the children's mother into the property he shares with his brother, in the hope that the children are placed in his care, and that ultimately, Kate can get them back. Elizabeth, Kate's eldest daughter had told the social worker that her mum has 'gone away to rehab'.

Recommendation

It is requested that the Looked After Children Overview and Scrutiny Committee consider this report and make any observations as it deems appropriate.

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