



Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership

Learning from the Oak Review

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1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Following a serious incident involving an assault on a Black young person in the care of Surrey County Council, the Safeguarding Children Partnership commissioned an independent review. The aim of the review was to understand the experience of the young person and the perpetrators of the violence within the wider Surrey context – i.e. the experience of minoritised communities and where services could be developed to prevent similar incidents in the future.
- 1.2 The review was led by an independent consultant supported by a panel of senior leaders from relevant organisations with responsibility for safeguarding children. This panel included those with expertise with working with minoritised groups in Surrey. The review process involved review of relevant documents as well as conversations with a wide range of practitioners and people who use services across Surrey – including young people and their families.
- 1.3 Terms of reference and key lines of enquiry for the review were agreed. The terms of reference specified that the review would be underpinned by a systems approach and explore learning on three levels:
 - individual child(ren) and their families
 - schools
 - wider community

2 THE CONTEXT - INTERACTING FACTORS AFFECTING THE YOUNG PEOPLE INVOLVED

- 2.1 It is significant that the victim and those responsible for the assault live in an area of relatively high deprivation and are from groups who experience racism on a day-to-day basis. The review found that the experience of children and families (at home, school and within the wider community) cannot be separated from this wider context. There was evidence of the cumulative distrust of authorities amongst minoritised groups and a strong message from young people that if they are not confident that racism will be adequately tackled in schools and communities, they will find their own responses and solutions.
- 2.2 The learning from the review highlights the importance of moving beyond an approach which views a serious incident through a single lens and aims to understand the impact of interacting factors on all the children's lives (often referred to as intersectionality).
- 2.3 The interacting factors explored during this review were:
 - The victim's experience as a child in care from a minoritised community who had experienced significant trauma from a young age. The meaning of her behaviour was not fully recognised and responded to via a well-coordinated multi-agency response.

- The need for help for children who have experienced significant trauma but do not have a diagnosed mental health condition.
- The experience of a Black young person in a predominantly white area. Overt and covert racism is the experience of too many young people in Surrey and there is a lack of trust in those in power and authority to keep them safe. Fear of speaking out may result in an attempt to manage alone – possibly through inappropriate responses.
- The experience of bullying and racism towards the Gypsy Roma Traveller community and a distrust of authority figures often stemming from previous contacts with statutory agencies.
- The impact of elective home education on children who are already deemed vulnerable and the need for sufficient exploration of why the decision has been taken to educate at home.
- The challenges presented by the covid pandemic. Some families were highly anxious about sending children to school during and after periods of lockdown and when children resumed school there were numerous concerns about children's health and mental health. In line with national figures, the numbers of children being removed to be electively home educated increased.
- The scarcity of community-based resources for young people working alongside specialist services.

3 FINDINGS

Finding One

This review highlights the importance of hearing the voice of minoritised groups across Surrey and the role that senior leaders play in establishing an inclusive culture. This includes ensuring that minoritised groups are fully represented at a strategic level within the Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership and within other relevant agency forums. Their voices need to be heard, understood and influence change.

- 3.1 This is an overarching issue underpinning the more specific findings and recommendations. Fundamental to this approach, is a culture across Surrey County Council which sets expectations and standards regarding inclusion, with the clear message that inclusive practice and safeguarding children are inextricably linked.
- 3.2 During the process of this review, we have been privileged to engage with groups with lived experience who are focused on enhancing the safety and wellbeing of specific minoritised populations within Surrey. The issues raised have been invaluable in developing the analysis within this report. What is less clear is how their voice and the initiatives that they are involved in are influencing cultural change and the overall safeguarding strategy across Surrey.
- 3.3 We have also heard from other organisations (for example Surrey Community Action) and the health inclusion service who are providing invaluable services. The impression has been that

there are resources already within the community which could be harnessed to work more closely with statutory organisations to help understand the lived experience of minoritised groups in the county.

Finding Two

The experience of Child A as a young Black person in Surrey is not an isolated event. The review has found through engagement with adults and children in Surrey that the experience of racism and racial trauma is present in other Surrey communities and there is an urgent need for all organisations and communities to listen to the voice of young people and their families and take action to improve community safety for young people.

- 3.4 The review has been privileged to hear the voice of young Black people and their families which gave powerful evidence of the lived experience of racism and racial trauma in Surrey. Fitting in, in a predominantly white area, presents particular challenges and there is a lack of trust in authorities which leads to young people and their families managing the situation in their own way, often alone.
- 3.5 The need for safe spaces which may be created through faith groups or youth clubs was apparent though the discussions. Although parents can help to create emotional safety for their child and contribute to preventing a negative cycle of retaliation, labelling and isolation, not all children will have this advantage. Trauma and disrupted relationships means that there is a need to understand the impact of combination of family trauma and racial trauma. This might also mean needing to consider the causes of "behavioural problems" and move beyond "behaviour management" to consideration of the root cause.
- 3.6 For some young people school played an important role in calling out racist language and behaviour and where this happened a sense of safety was enhanced. However, for other children their experience was not as positive and there were descriptions of racism which were not dealt with or dealt with in such a way that pupils suffered the consequences within their peer group. This led to pupils keeping incidents hidden.
- 3.7 As well as responses within individual schools a clear strategic lead at a county level is important in setting clear expectations. There are some initiatives already in place including Surrey Healthy Schools approach but to date there is no expectation regarding mandatory training within Surrey schools or elsewhere. The Surrey Race Equality and Minority Achievement team (REMA) focuses on improving educational attainment but there is no focus on anti-racist practice and consequently, the impact of racial trauma on behaviours and pupil experience in school is not addressed via this team. As a traded service the opportunity for a strategic Surrey wide approach appears to be lost.
- 3.8 Although schools play an important role in fostering positive attitudes and values in young people, they cannot be solely responsible. The overall responsibility for community safety sits across local community safety partnerships and Surrey County Council. Allocation of resources and service development is an issue that needs further exploration and debate.

Finding Three

The impact of racism on the Gypsy Roma Traveller community needs to be better understood and taken into account in work with children and families.

- 3.9 The term Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) community is used in this report. Both the Gypsy and Irish Traveller communities are categorised as ethnic minority groups under the Race Relations Act 1976 (amended 2000), the Human Rights Act 1998, and the Equality Act 2010. However, the use of the generic term (GRT) should not detract from the need when discussing individual families to be more specific and acknowledge the different heritage and culture between groups from different cultures.
- 3.10 Racism as it affects the Gypsy Roma Traveller community is an important theme within the review and the failure of agencies to meet the cultural needs of Gypsy Roma Traveller families and recognise the impact of possible hate crime towards community members has also been recognised in reviews elsewhere in England¹. The discussion with the Surrey Gypsy Roma Traveller community's forum confirmed powerfully how discrimination, bullying and hate crime affects the community with numerous examples of racist behaviour that have had a profound effect on children and young people. Other discussions for the review confirmed the general lack of positive approaches to developing a positive identity for any group that identify as Gypsy Roma Traveller – there is little celebration of Gypsy Roma Traveller culture in school or in society. Comments from young people from outside the Gypsy Roma Traveller community also confirmed that there is still some way to go in promoting a positive identity for young Gypsy Roma Traveller people.
- 3.11 There is evidence within this review that consideration of GRT culture is generally absent from professional records and there is a need for greater consideration of this aspect of children and young people's lived experience. This includes understanding the meaning of behaviours, the feelings of the GRT community towards statutory agencies, fear that their children will be removed and other barriers that might prevent agencies from working effectively with them.
- 3.12 There was good practice evident in the review in respect of the work of Surrey Community Action, the health inclusion team and within one school who clearly put a lot of effort into building trusting relationships over time. Learning from positive practice will be important for other agencies.
- 3.13 There is a multi-agency group (the GRT Partnership group chaired by Surrey County Council) which meets quarterly and was an output from the GRT rapid needs assessment following another tragic incident within the Gypsy Roma Traveller community. Whilst this group have been making progress in developing a strategic plan, this review confirms the importance of maintaining momentum and highlighting gaps where services need further development.

¹ National Child Safeguarding Review Panel Annual Report 2022-23 Page 69.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65bce1df7042820013752116/Child_Safeguarding_Review_Panel_a_nnual_report_2022_to_2023.pdf

Finding Four

Where a young person in care has experienced significant trauma, there are opportunities to improve a multi-agency approach including schools, the local authority as corporate parent and mental health services.

- 3.14 The young person who was the victim of the assault was a child in the care of the local authority. Almost inevitably young people in care will have experienced some level of trauma and the review findings confirm the importance of fully understanding what this means for each individual child. Where trauma associated with past events combines with structural factors such as racism and leads to communication of distress through behavioural responses, there is a danger that the focus will be on "behaviour management" rather than a more holistic response. There is also a danger that for some young people who have no defined mental health condition the right therapeutic help may not be available. Even where young people may not want to engage with services available there needs to be consideration as to whether there were alternative ways of engaging with them and helping their voice to be heard.
- 3.15 The review identifies the importance of good communication between the local authority and schools, especially at the point of admission. Social workers have a responsibility to share relevant information and the Designated Teacher for children in care also needs to ask for the information that they need to plan for the child. An important aspect of this process is a transition Personal Education Plan (PEP) meeting. Good information exchange at the point of transfer is now being promoted by Surrey virtual school who have amended the PEP process to include a mandatory update by the social worker on the plan. Education Support workers within the virtual school will be informed when a young person has moved prompting a conversation with the social worker.
- 3.16 The secondary school has explored with this review the challenges associated with taking a trauma informed approach within school when the predominant expectation via inspection regimes is behaviour management. This is an important observation and an issue which is leading to various developments in Surrey schools and elsewhere in the UK. Surrey virtual school has recognised the impact of trauma on the lives of children in care and is promoting a trauma informed approach to behaviour management. There are other initiatives within Surrey, but this mixed offer does not give a clear strategic lead in the development of a consistent approach which is integral to effective safeguarding and inclusive practice.
- 3.17 Responding to concerns about racist behaviour within schools needs sound processes underpinned by professional knowledge, judgment, attitudes and values. Many schools use on-line safeguarding recording systems, and these may not include incidents relating to children in care. This can cause a delay in incidents being immediately escalated to senior leaders, but any procedure must also be accompanied by a recognition of the need to act swiftly when racist incidents come to the attention of staff and a proactive approach which does not rely on online systems alone.

Finding Five

The review confirms the importance of all practitioners understanding the safeguarding implications of elective home education.

3.18 This is a significant aspect of this review because two of the young people involved in the assault were not in school and were described as electively home educated.

3.19 Local authorities have no formal powers or duty to monitor home education, but they do have duties to identify children not receiving a suitable education, and to intervene. Guidance from the Department for Education notes *the department believes that although the primary responsibility for ensuring that children are properly educated belongs to parents, a local authority has a moral and social obligation to ensure that a child is safe and being suitably educated. If it is not clear that that is the case, the authority should act to remedy the position*² (P4). Action may be in the form of legal intervention via a School Attendance Order and/or via safeguarding procedures if there are concerns that a child is at risk of significant harm.

3.20 The guidance encourages local authorities to contact families on at least an annual basis, to enquire about the suitability of the education being provided, although there is no requirement for families to comply with a visit to the home.

3.21 Surrey has a clear elective home education process which has operated since 2020/21. This goes further than some local authorities in that home visits are an expected part of the process (with parental permission). There is an opportunity at the initial contact visit to explore the reasons for elective home education and discuss plans for a suitable education. There is also a culture within the team of where necessary carrying out these visits with social workers if the child has an allocated worker.

3.22 Some children are removed from school roll to be electively home educated and subsequently remain hidden from the scrutiny of the local authority. This was not the case for children within this review. However, children who were known to be from the Gypsy Roma Traveller community may be expected (or even encouraged) to remove their children from school. There may be little challenge or curiosity when this happens driven by a lack of aspiration for Gypsy Roma Traveller children and stereotypical assumptions about their life chances. Care needs to be taken that children from Gypsy Roma Traveller cultures are not disadvantaged by lowering expectation regarding non-school attendance.

3.23 Although home education itself is not a safeguarding concern, Surrey EHE procedures (2022) are clear that *where the child has a CP or CIN plan the suitability of home education will be considered within the context of the plan*. The findings of this review confirm the importance of this approach and joint working between social workers and the education inclusion team,

²https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5ca21e0b40f0b625e97ffe06/Elective_home_education_guidance_for_LAv2.0.pdf

alongside government guidance³ that acknowledges there is no legal requirement for parents to discuss home education with the school but:

"Where a parent/carer has expressed their intention to remove a child from school with a view to educating at home, we recommend that local authorities, schools, and other key professionals work together to coordinate a meeting with parents/carers where possible."

3.24 For at least one of the young people involved in this review it would have been helpful to understand poor attendance as a safeguarding concern, including the role of the young person as a young carer. There is also now evidence that this young person would have benefited from psychological assessments designed to understand some of the factors that affected her ability to engage in education.

Finding Six

The families involved in this review were part of a complex network within the local community. Proactive work by the police, the community safety partnership and the local youth club was largely disconnected from the work of children's social care and there are opportunities to develop a community-based safeguarding system.

3.25 This incident took place within an area with a defined community identity, and local police and the community safety partnership have described a proactive approach to working with antisocial behaviour and complex family situations via community harm and risk management (CHaRMM) meetings, which are accountable to local Community Safety Partnerships (CSPs). It is clear that there are differing expectations regarding the way in which risks within the community might be managed and social workers do not understand CHaRMM to be within their remit although members of CHaRMM believe social work input is important where families known to children's social care are being discussed.

3.26 There is an opportunity for an integrated approach to community safety with a strategic response across community safety and the Surrey Safeguarding Children's partnership. An integrated approach where roles and responsibilities were clear across community organisations, risk management meetings, schools and social care may have allowed for the escalating incidents of racial abuse involving young people to have been recognised and managed.

3.27 The Surrey Police Youth Engagement Officers within the area had a considerable amount of contact with young people in these families and have continued to do so after the serious incident. The impression is that these officers are an important community resource, often working at the interface of schools and the community.

3.28 Another important community resource is the local youth centre. In the context of many youth clubs nationally closing due to lack of investment in this provision, the value of this type of resource became clearly apparent during the review. Young people told the review

³ Keeping Children Safe in Education 2023 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keeping-children-safe-in-education>

how much they valued the space and that without this provision they would have nowhere to go to meet peers – other than the street.

3.29 After the serious incident there are varying views as to how well the community response was managed. It is important to note that from the school's perspective they greatly valued the community response meetings led by the community safety partnership and feel that there would have been value in working together in this way over an extended period of time.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation One

Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership should bring the learning from this review to the attention of the National Child Safeguarding Panel and senior leadership and governance forums across the Partnership.

Recommendation Two

Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership should identify core values through a clear statement within the strategic plan which promotes inclusion and positive engagement with minoritised groups across all organisations working with children in the County.

Recommendation Three

Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership should include the lived experienced of minoritised groups in Surrey in strategy development and engage with forums and community groups across the county.

Recommendation Four

All leaders including governors and trustees in Surrey education settings, schools and colleges should complete inclusive practice training. They should also be able to demonstrate how their culture underpinned by policies, protocols, procedures and activities is in line with the 2010 Equality Act and how leaders at all levels are working to foster good relations across all characteristics.

Recommendation Five

All agencies should work with existing partners, such as the Surrey Minority Ethnic Forum, to identify and strategically plan for listening to the experience of Black and Minority Ethnic children and families and work with education settings, schools and colleges and front line services to take action to address racism and improve the safety and wellbeing of young people in their community.

Recommendation Six

Partner agencies across Surrey should build on the strategic multi-agency plan for working positively with the Gypsy Roma Traveller communities. This should include a specific focus on positive promotion of GRT cultures within education settings, schools and colleges, alongside the work of the Surrey Inclusion Health Team in providing advocacy, health advocacy and outreach to all minoritised groups.

Recommendation Seven

Surrey Safeguarding Children partnership should work with partner agencies to develop a staff development programme to improve staff confidence and skills in working positively with families to safeguard children living within Gypsy Roma Traveller Communities and tackle discrimination and improve outcomes.

Recommendation Eight

Surrey children's services and health agencies should develop and embed a trauma informed approach to working with children which always:

- understands and responds to the meaning of a child's behaviours
- provides the right therapeutic support at the right time for children who have experienced trauma but do not meet the criteria for child mental health services.

Recommendation Nine

Surrey County Council Education and Lifelong Learning should develop a position statement regarding implementing a trauma informed approach to behaviour management across Surrey linked to a coherent training offer.

Recommendation Ten

The local authority and relevant partners (as defined within Section 10 of the Children's Act 2004) should refocus attention on corporate parenting principles to ensure that all Surrey Looked After Children and Care Leavers are championed to thrive and succeed. The approach is laid out within [Applying corporate parenting principles to looked After Children and Care Leavers' Statutory guidance for local authorities February 2018.](#)

Recommendation Eleven

When a child in care moves school, the Designated Teacher for looked after children at the receiving school should ensure that a transition PEP meeting always takes place, and this should be followed up by the virtual school and reviewed by the Independent Reviewing Officer at the next looked after child review.

Recommendation Twelve

Surrey children's services should set out expectations and audit implementation regarding actions when a child in care is suspended or excluded from school to ensure that a multi-agency approach is taken to understanding the circumstances and managing reintegration.

Recommendation Thirteen

Education settings, schools and colleges should include children in care as a specific group in any online safeguarding system.

Recommendation Fourteen

Surrey Safeguarding Children's Partnership should work with appropriate agencies and organisations to review safeguarding policies and procedures to ensure that they give sufficient guidance (backed up by training) on integrating an understanding of elective home education into day-to-day practice.

Recommendation Fifteen

Where parents notify the school and/or the local authority that they will be removing their child from school for elective home education and the child has been known to children's social care within the last 12 months there should be an expectation of a discussion with the school, family, children's social care and the education inclusion team. This discussion should explore the factors driving home education and the support needed and potential impact on outcomes for the child.

Recommendation Sixteen

The Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership and Community Safety Partnerships throughout the county should work together to develop an integrated strategic approach to keeping children safe in their communities. This should ensure that roles and responsibilities are clear and practitioners know how to work with the system in their day-to-day practice.

Recommendation Seventeen

Surrey County Council should consider investing in youth provision delivered in local communities focusing on wellbeing, education, and community cohesion. This should provide a place for young people to come together with peers and develop relationships with trusted adults as part of the prevention and early help offer.