

**A Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review**

**Alfie**

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**Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership and all those involved in this review would like to express their heartfelt condolences to all those who knew Alfie, particularly his family who have expressed how much they miss his warm infectious smile and sense of humour.**

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## 1. Introduction

### Reason for this Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (LCSPR<sup>1</sup>)

- 1.1 This review was initiated because of the murder of Alfie by an adult, Dirk Howell who was the partner of Alfie's mother, Carla Scott. Dirk Howell (who also used the name 'Dean') has been convicted of murder and child cruelty and received a lengthy custodial sentence; Carla Scott was convicted of manslaughter and child cruelty and has also received a significant custodial sentence.

### Process of the LCSPR

- 1.2 The purpose of any Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (LSCPR) is to reflect on the safeguarding response in one set of circumstances and to consider if improvements or examples of good practice can be embedded locally or nationally, to safeguard and promote the welfare of children. In this case, a serious incident notification was received, and a Rapid Review process initiated. Each agency provided information about their involvement, reflected on their immediate learning and made both early recommendations for action and took steps for immediate changes in practice as result. Alfie's death met the criteria for a LCSPR and an Independent Reviewer, Jane Wiffin<sup>2</sup>, was commissioned. It was agreed this review would use the Significant Incident Learning Process (SILP<sup>3</sup>) methodology. The review was due to start in 2021 but was halted while the criminal investigation and trial was ongoing.
- 1.3 During this time the immediate lessons learned from the professional response to Alfie's circumstances and other Serious Case Reviews led to a range of activities by the Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership (WSCP) including training, audits, briefings, and refreshed guidance about the role of the multi-agency group in child protection. WSCP has used the findings from the Solihull Joint Targeted Area Inspection<sup>i</sup> to challenge the three Safeguarding Partners on their position and areas for improvements against those findings.
- 1.4 The criminal trial was completed in early summer 2023 and the review resumed. A panel of local senior managers representing involved agencies was convened. This panel oversaw the review process and acted as a critical friend in the writing of the review report and recommendations. Single agency reports were commissioned, records reviewed, and interviews undertaken with those professionals who worked with Alfie. This has not been easy for those professionals, but they have been open and reflective seeking to ensure that any necessary improvements to practice are highlighted and

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<sup>1</sup> A Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (LCSPR) is a locally conducted multi-agency review in circumstances where a child has been abused or neglected, resulting in serious harm or death, and/or there is cause for concern as to the way in which agencies have worked together to safeguard the child. See Chapter 4. Page 84. [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2018 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> Jane is an experienced independent reviewer with a professional background in social work. She has written and published many serious case reviews and local child safeguarding practice reviews.

<sup>3</sup> [Review Consulting – SILP • safeguarding • investigating • driving improvement](#)

recommendations for change are made. The independent reviewer would like to thank them all for their time and important reflections.

**Family member involvement.**

- 1.5 Some family members were also interviewed. This was difficult for them as they are still mourning the loss of Alfie. They were clear that Dirk Howell was responsible for Alfie's murder and Carla Scott for his manslaughter and all responsibility lies with these adults, a parent who should have cared for and protected him and an adult who came into Alfie's life and caused disruption and violence. Their views are incorporated into the analysis section.

## 2. Professional involvement with Alfie and his family

<b>This chronology is not a comprehensive list of all events and professional involvement. It is a summary of the key points during the period under review.</b>	
2018	Carla Scott and Alfie move to Worcestershire. Alfie subject to child protection plan <sup>4</sup> for neglect and he and mother were homeless.
2018	There was a transfer conference and Alfie was made subject to child protection plan for neglect for 6 months.
2019	Alfie now subject to child in need plan <sup>5</sup> for 7 months.
August 2019	Dirk Howell meets Carla Scott. There are concerns from family and neighbours about Dirk Howell’s criminal history, his aggression, shouting at Alfie and cannabis use. Carla Scott advised to complete Clare’s law application <sup>6</sup> . A previous history of violence towards others was disclosed but there was no record of Dirk Howell being a perpetrator of domestic abuse.
September 2019	Strategy discussion. Dirk Howell’s long criminal history, marker for violence and drug dealing shared. Immediate safety plan in place. Dirk Howell was under investigation for a burglary of an elderly man where firearms were stolen. Carla Scott said she did not believe Dirk posed a risk to her or Alfie.
October 2019	Initial Child Protection Conference convened <sup>7</sup> . Child protection plan and safety plan agreed.
November 2019	Concerns shared by the neighbours that Dirk Howell was seen behaving cruelly to Alfie. Dirk found to be in the home by the police. Dirk threatened neighbours with violence for sharing concerns.
January 2020	Review Child Protection Conference <sup>8</sup> . Safety plan to remain in place, but legal advice to be sought regarding whether the threshold was met to initiate Public Law Outline <sup>9</sup> or make a care proceedings application.
February 2020	There were concerns from neighbours about anti-social behaviour by Carla Scott and Dirk Howell in the form of parties and loud music and Dirk’s aggressiveness in response to complaints. Alfie was reported to be hungry in school.

<sup>4</sup> A Child Protection Plan is a plan that is created when a child is judged to be at risk of significant harm, which affects the health, welfare, and development of a child. The plan is created at a child protection conference and is a written record for parents, carers, and professionals, which sets out the work needed to reduce the risk of harm to a child at risk.

<sup>5</sup> A child in need plan sets out the support being provided to a child and/or family by Children’s Services. The plan should be drawn up in partnership with the child and their family after a child in need assessment

<sup>6</sup> The Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme (DVDS), also known as “Clare’s Law” enables the police to disclose information to a victim or potential victim of domestic abuse about their partner’s or ex-partner’s previous abusive or violent offending.

<sup>7</sup> A Child Protection Conference is a meeting where a family and professionals meet to share information and discuss concerns about a child or young person because they have either been subject to some form of harm or abuse or are at risk of it. Conferences are chaired by Child Protection Case Conference Chairs who are qualified social workers.

<sup>8</sup> At Review Conferences the Child Protection Plan is looked at and a discussion takes place as to whether the outcomes intended from the Plan have been reached and whether the child or young person is safe. The first review conference will take place three months after the initial conference, and any subsequent conferences every six months until the child is taken off the Child Protection Plan.

<sup>9</sup> The Public Law Outline (PLO) sets out the duties local authorities have when considering taking a case to court to ask for a Care Order to take a child into care or for a Supervision Order to be made. This is often described as initiating public law care proceedings.

March 2020	Carla Scott physically abusive to Alfie and there was evidence of Dirk Howell being drunk and aggressive to Alfie in the community.
March 2020	COVID pandemic. Changes to operating procedures for all agencies. School open to support vulnerable children. Carla Scott would not allow Alfie to attend, despite this being an expectation for all children subject to child protection plans. School attendance was not enforceable during Covid.
April 2020	Further concerns from neighbours about Alfie and Dirk Howell seen behaving inappropriately and aggressively to him.
April 2020	The Headteacher of Alfie's school raises concerns about the lack of progress of the child protection plan and increased risks to his welfare. Informed that a Legal Planning Meeting would be convened.
May 2020	Legal Planning Meeting (LPM <sup>10</sup> ). Risk assessment of Dirk Howell to be completed. Parenting assessment of Carla Scott and Alfie's father.
June 2020	Dirk Howell caught shoplifting on 2 occasions. Was extremely verbally aggressive on the first occasion and on the second he punched a female shop assistant in the face. He was arrested and would be charged later.
July 2020	Review LPM. Agreed that the threshold for proceedings was not met. Child protection plan to continue. Dirk Howell now allowed to be in the home and required to engage with child protection plan, attend core groups <sup>11</sup> , a parenting course, and anger management support.
July 2020	Review Child Protection Conference rescheduled to October 2020 due to the local authority COVID critical incident arrangements, which meant that no children were removed from child protection plans during this period. Regular multi-agency core groups took place.
August 2020	Neighbour shares concern with police that they can hear a child being harmed. This was responded to and denied by Carla Scott. Dirk Howell not seen at the home. Dirk threatens to burn neighbours home down for sharing concerns.
September 2020	Alfie returned to school. Concerns about Alfie being hungry and unkempt.
October 2020	Review Child Protection Conference held. Child protection plan adapted by the Review LPM.
October 2020	Dirk Howell convicted of physical assault of a train guard. Two further offences were being investigated: the burglary and the assault of a shop assistant.

<sup>10</sup> A Legal Planning Meeting is held when it is decided that the child's circumstances have not improved enough to protect the child from significant harm. The purpose of the meeting is to decide if the legal threshold is met to commence pre-proceedings or to issue immediate care proceedings. The meeting is attended by social workers, lawyers for Children's Services, and other professionals involved.

<sup>11</sup> The core group is responsible for developing and implementing the child protection plan by agreeing and developing the child protection plan, identifying the actions to achieve change and timescales required to achieve the agreed outcomes. Progressing the child protection plan against the agreed timescales and outcomes, continuously evaluating the impact of the child protection plan and ensuring the core group keeps the child at the centre of their thinking.

November 2020	School was worried about Alfie; he looked unkempt he had a nasty ear infection and seemed unsettled. Discussed with lead social worker. Intelligence (uncorroborated) that Carla Scott and Dirk Howell might be dealing drugs from the home.
January 2021	Change of social worker. Child protection plan reviewed, contact with neighbours who were part of the plan and they expressed concerns, contact with maternal grandparents who said they were unaware of the child protection plan. Dirk Howell found in Carla Scott's bedroom; having said he was not in the home. Carla Scott asked for change of social worker.
February 2021	Alfie was murdered.



### 3. Analysis, findings and recommendations.

- 3.1 This Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review has taken place after the criminal trial of Dirk Howell and Carla Scott, and they have been found to be responsible for the cruel and harsh treatment and subsequent death of Alfie.
- 3.2 It is important to say this at the outset, because when a review is conducted about the deliberate death of a child, those professionals who worked with the child and family can be held responsible for what happened, rather than focussing on the reality; that Alfie's mother, Carla Scott and her partner, Dirk Howell are responsible. This review has found that professionals working with Alfie were hard working, they showed care, and commitment to Alfie and the family, but were often hampered by two adults who sought to deliberately lie, mislead, and cover up what was happening.
- 3.3 In addition, a lot of the time under review took place during the COVID pandemic where agencies had to change and develop their standard operating procedures and to carry on with depleted resources in terms of staff, but also increased tasks and new approaches to things like meetings and home visits. The COVID pandemic also enabled Carla Scott to keep Alfie at home, despite advice not to do so, and despite considerable support and reassurance from the school she did not change her mind. COVID also provided Carla Scott and Dirk Howell an opportunity to isolate Alfie from family, friends and neighbours under the guise of shielding and his poor health. It meant those usual safety mechanisms were absent.
- 3.4 In reviewing Alfie's circumstances, a number of interconnected themes have emerged, these are listed below and then expanded upon with learning and recommendations where appropriate through the remainder of the report:
- Assumptions around contact when new partners join families, and where it is found to be appropriate and in line with what children want, how to make contact safe and realistic.
  - The importance of a professional understanding of domestic abuse which holds perpetrators responsible for their behaviour and seeks to address this.
  - The issue of fixed thinking or confirmatory bias. The importance of professionals being enabled to reflect, and to change their mind in the face of information that does not support their initial hypothesis, for example there was no evidence that Carla Scott was (refer to paragraph 3.15) being coerced and controlled; a new hypothesis was needed.
  - The importance of consideration of how to manage the criminal and abusive behaviour of adults who do not meet the threshold for public protection meetings<sup>12</sup> and where there is professional judgement required about the need

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<sup>12</sup> Multi-agency public protection arrangements are in place to ensure the successful management of violent and sexual offenders. [MAPPA Guidance March 2023 .docx \(live.com\)](#)

for risk management plans<sup>13</sup>. How do we make what is seen as a police task a multi-agency child protection task?

- How well physical abuse is responded to, particularly an evaluation of the need for a strategy discussion in the context of children already subject to child protection plans and where discrepancies and the demeanour of children is of concern suggesting the need for a child protection medical.
- The importance of core group<sup>14</sup> processes to consider the effectiveness of child protection planning and move from an incident focus to thinking about child focused planning which includes children's outcomes.
- The professional reliance on children telling professionals about abuse and harm, when those professionals know how difficult and risky that is. The importance of weighing up the available evidence. Alongside this issue is the possible jeopardy that children may face when they do say what is happening at home and professionals tell parents/caregivers about this with the potential for retribution.
- How should professionals respond when they are concerned that children are being silenced, told to keep secrets, and coached in what to tell professionals?
- How the safeguarding system responds to concerns raised by friends, family and neighbours, and recognise the risks they take to alert professionals to the safety and wellbeing of children.

Throughout this report learning points, practice considerations and recommendations are highlighted. The learning points highlight the main lessons that can be taken from this review, whilst practice considerations provide those who are responsible for the delivery of services to children and their families an opportunity to reflect on their own agency's practice against the findings in this report. Recommendations are there to provide clear guidance to Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership on where and how current practices can be strengthened.

**Theme 1: The professional response when a new partner joins a family group known to specialist services.**

**Key points of learning**

- contact arrangements should be discussed in a child focussed way,
- should provide clarity about what 'supervised contact' looks like
- should provide supervision to ensure that it is safe for children until a suitably assessed individual can be identified within the child plan.

3.5 Dirk Howell and Carla Scott were known to have started a relationship in August 2019. At this time Alfie was subject to a child in need plan. Neighbours, friends,

<sup>13</sup> [Identifying, assessing and managing risk | College of Policing](#)

<sup>14</sup> The core group is a meeting of professionals and family members who are responsible for developing the detail of the child protection plan, putting the plan into practice, allocating tasks as appropriate and reviewing progress or the lack of it and deciding what action needs to be taken.

anonymous sources, and family members all contacted children's services to raise concerns about Dirk Howell being in the family home, because of his past criminal background and drug dealing, his current aggression and worries that he was physically harming Alfie. This was discussed with Carla Scott, and she was advised to complete a Clare's law application. This was done and although it showed he had previously been violent towards others; it showed no record of him being a perpetrator of domestic abuse; Carla Scott disregarded the information about Dirk Howell's violent past and saw this singular piece of evidence as supportive of her view that he posed no risk. A strategy meeting was convened where full information was shared about Dirk Howell; there was a marker against him for violence, he had been in prison until recently, he was currently subject to probation oversight and there were ongoing criminal investigations indicating violence, for which he was out on bail.

- 3.6 The strategy discussion focussed on what arrangements should be in place to ensure that the contact Dirk Howell had with Alfie was safe. It did not consider whether it was appropriate for Alfie to have any contact with him whilst the child protection enquiries were ongoing and the risk unknown. Alfie had no relationship with him that needed maintaining or nurturing, the usual reasons for contact arrangements. There was no discussion with Alfie about what he felt about contact with Dirk Howell, where he wanted it to take place and what this contact should look like. Dirk Howell never made himself available to discuss whether he wanted to have contact with Alfie. The driver was always Carla Scott; she asserted that Dirk wanted to see Alfie and Alfie wanted to see him. At this stage there was no evidence that this was the case.
- 3.7 There was a further opportunity to discuss the appropriateness of contact arrangements at the initial Child Protection Conference once the child protection enquiries had concluded and Dirk's reluctance to engage with professionals was known. However, there continued plans to facilitate Dirk's contact with Alfie which never faltered over time; Carla Scott's assertion that Dirk Howell should be enabled to have a role as a parental figure was never questioned. This was despite Dirk Howell absenting himself from all discussions with specialist services and being aggressive when challenged. His supervised contact with Alfie was only observed on one occasion during the risk assessment undertaken in May 2020. Friends, neighbours, school staff and members of the community reported they had seen Dirk Howell behave aggressively and abusively toward Alfie. This did not alter the professional view that some form of supervised contact was necessary.
- 3.8 Carla Scott was asked to supervise all contact between Alfie and Dirk Howell, in part because Carla Scott was seen as a safe and caring parent who had a good relationship with Alfie and because she was viewed as 'engaging' with professionals; this meant that she attended meetings, she was not seen to actively prevent professionals seeing Alfie to ask him about concerns and she was mostly available for home visits. She also said that she understood professional concerns, but that she

believed Dirk Howell posed no risk to her or Alfie; a contradiction that was never addressed. This was not engagement; it was going along with what Carla Scott thought professionals expected and wanted to hear. She never accepted concerns but went along with what she saw as the 'professional's' agenda. Initially it was believed that Carla Scott might have been coerced or groomed by Dirk Howell or that as these were early days of the relationship that she had not witnessed his anger or aggression. As time went on there was clear evidence that Dirk behaved in aggressive and abusive ways to Alfie and not only did she not report it, but actively lied about Dirk Howell being present. Dirk Howell was found to be at the property at different times of the day and in the early hours of the morning indicating a greater presence in the home. Carla Scott would deny his presence, he would often be found somewhere in the home when police or social workers went looking (and there was inconsistency in this) and would then be asked to leave. The emerging evidence was that no one was supervising Alfie, he was left alone inside or outside the home, whilst Carla Scott and Dirk Howell socialised and spent time together. This should have prompted more discussion about whether Carla Scott was the right person to supervise this contact.

- 3.9 Over time there was also a lack of clarity about what 'supervised contact' meant. Initially Dirk Howell was not 'to stay in the home overnight' and his daytime contact was to be supervised by Carla Scott. There was no discussion of what this looked like in Alfie's day to day life. Was it allowed for Dirk Howell to be there during the day, what were the limits of this? Was he allowed to walk him to school, something he was seen to do regularly with Carla Scott? There was no discussion about the practicality of Carla Scott supervising all contact with Dirk, given the needs of Alfie. The exact nature and purpose of the 'supervised contact' remained unclear and unfocused on what was best for Alfie.
- 3.10 New partners join families known to specialist services all the time. This happens with advice and guidance about the importance of considering children's developmental needs for safety and security and the harm that can occur with multiple attachment figures. It is right that adults can make choices for themselves and their children. Here the risks were not fully explored or understood and were therefore unaddressed. This reminds us that children have rights, parents and parent figures have responsibilities. There is no automatic right to be in contact with children, and there will be times when this needs to be made clear.
- 3.11 Alfie had been subject to a child protection plan which then stepped down to a child in need plan. These plans were focussed on Carla Scott's ability to provide safe and positive parenting. This should have led to a greater questioning about the appropriateness of Carla Scott being suitable to supervise Dirk Howell's contact, if indeed contact was deemed to be appropriate and in Alfie's best interests.
- 3.12 Professionals have been reminded over the last few years about the importance of recognising the role of men in children's lives. The imperative, most recently outlined in the recent National Safeguarding Panel report 'the myth of invisible men'<sup>ii</sup>, is to

ensure father's or father figures are included in the service offer, the value they bring to children's lives is to be recognised and the risks they pose to be well understood. Alfie's circumstances are a good example of where Dirk Howell was not a father figure and should not have been treated as such, based only on Carla Scott's self-report. He demonstrated constantly that he had no wish to be involved with services designed to improve Alfie's circumstances and there was no evidence that he developed any meaningful relationship with Alfie over the 16-month period he was in his life.

- 3.13 There will also be times when no automatic assumption is made about what meetings fathers/father figures should be included in and which information should be shared with them. The imperative should be what is safe and right for children.

**Practice Consideration 1:** Contact arrangements in the context of family need to be crystal clear so that children are kept safe within these arrangements. Careful assessment is required for any family member providing supervision, which considers their capacity and willingness to provide safe contact arrangements. This should be written down in a safety plan, and reviewed as part of any agreed process such as child protection plans and child in need processes.

**Recommendation 1:** A practice briefing should be created to highlight the issues raised by this review.

**Theme 2: The importance of a good professional understanding of domestic abuse and violence to:**

- keep victim/survivors safe.
- ensure the safety and wellbeing of children.
- hold perpetrators responsible for their behaviour.

**Part 1: the response to domestic abuse**

- 3.14 Carla Scott had been subject to domestic abuse and violence by a previous partner, and this abuse continued to be perpetrated when she was provided with her own accommodation and whilst Alfie was subject to a child protection plan in Worcestershire in 2018. At this time the analysis was that Carla Scott had made a positive move to Worcestershire to escape that violence; in fact, Carla Scott moved because she was evicted due to rent arrears. There should be no automatic assumption that those who are subject to domestic abuse, coercion and control can make a choice to leave. This is to misunderstand the nature of coercion and control.
- 3.15 Given the history of both Carla Scott and Dirk Howell, professional concerns about the possibility of Dirk being domestically abusive were understandable and in October 2019 it was agreed at the Initial Child Protection Conference that Carla Scott was to be supported to disclose any abuse and to be enabled to leave the relationship. This assumed that those who are being abused can make open and free

choices. The focus remained on the victim/survivor and not the behaviour of a potential perpetrator.

## **Part 2: Recognising that this is not domestic abuse.**

- 3.16 It was recognised that Carla Scott was a victim of domestic abuse in a previous relationship, and practitioners needed to consider the impact of this and potential consideration that she could have been a victim in her relationship with Dirk.
- 3.17 Over time there was no evidence of coercion and control of Carla Scott by Dirk Howell, and although this is with the benefit of hindsight there was no evidence through the child protection period or criminal trial process. Carla Scott consistently failed to report that Dirk Howell was behaving aggressively to Alfie. She constantly lied about what had happened, and her assertion that he posed no risk to her, or Alfie never wavered. There emerged evidence that she herself was physically abusive to Alfie, and defended that Dirk behaved as he did because of Alfie's poor behaviour. Alfie was universally seen as a well behaved and polite child who often did not get the parenting he needed. There should have been concern that Dirk Howell focussed on Alfie's alleged unmanageable behaviour as a justification for his behaviour and Carla Scott supported this. For whatever reason, a picture started to emerge of Carla Scott and Dirk Howell focussing on their relationship, and Alfie fitting into this. Not of coercion and control.
- 3.18 Professionals became fixed in their thinking and demonstrated what is confirmatory bias. This is the tendency of professionals to focus on information that confirms their original analysis and hypothesis and give insufficient consideration and weighting to any information that contradicts it. This has been a feature of critical incident reviews for over 30 years, was highlighted in the NSPCC report into the 10 Pitfalls in safeguarding practice<sup>iii</sup> and was a feature picked up in the recent report into the deaths of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson<sup>iv</sup>.
- 3.19 Professionals need to be aware of the tendency within the complex area of safeguarding of adopting fixed positions about what is going on and be prepared to consider alternative hypotheses. Supervision and management oversight should help with this. Despite there being evidence of close supervision and management oversight of the lead social workers, this did not help here.

**Learning Point 2:** In the absence of any information to support the initial concern that Carla Scott was being coercively controlled by Dirk Howell, the risk that Carla Scott presented to Alfie as a perpetrator should have been recognised earlier.

Professionals need to be supported through supervision and reflective case discussions to be able to recognise 'fixed' thinking and the need to change the analysis. This issue of confirmatory bias is a key feature of many LCSPPR's and there needs to be further awareness of the danger of this in safeguarding practice.

**Recommendation 2:** Agencies should challenge their views and hypotheses in cases when there is no evidence to substantiate those views, thereby being cognisant of confirmatory bias and the risks of not considering alternative hypotheses.

In this case there was no evidence that Carla Scott was subject to coercion and control but there was information that she was a perpetrator of abuse against Alfie.

**Theme 3: Response meetings: an adult of concern who did not meet the threshold for public protection meetings; professional consideration of what actions are possible.**

- 3.20 From the start of the review period there was concern about Dirk Howell and his history of violence and criminality. He did not meet the criteria for public protection meetings or Integrated Offender Management processes, but he was subject to bail conditions in relation to a burglary where firearms had been stolen in August 2019. There was information that drugs were being sold from the address, that Dirk Howell had threatened neighbours, including a threat of arson, he was connected with a burglary where firearms had been stolen and remained outstanding, coupled with a neighbour reporting seeing a male in the address with what he believed to be an air rifle, together with other offending during this period. Additionally, there was poor compliance with his release conditions. There was nothing to indicate that this information was brought together and then considered alongside the possible risks he presented to the family, so leading to positive action to manage Dirk Howell's behaviour.
- 3.21 In the period May 2019 to January 2020 Dirk Howell was subject to post release supervision by the Probation Service which required him to live at a nominated address and to be 'of good character'. This was known to all involved through the strategy meeting, but Probation were not informed about the link with Carla Scott and Alfie. Although the post release supervision provided few consequences for breaches, this would have been an opportunity to consider where he was living and to hold him to account for his behaviour. Probation did not know that Dirk Howell had threatened neighbours with reprisals for reporting concerns. This was a clear breach of the supervision requirements. It would have been a process of holding him accountable.
- 3.21 Over the period of this review there were many incidents of concern, they were different in nature, but all were treated in isolation from each other and were not discussed holistically in the context of joint enquiries between the police and children's services.
- 3.22 There were early concerns about the assault of a friend of Carla Scott's and Alfie was present; the victim did not wish to pursue a complaint. There were concerns from neighbours about harsh and cruel parenting of Alfie reported to either children's services or the police. These were discussed in the context of strategy discussions and child protection processes, but no joint plan agreed to respond. Because of the neighbours making these referrals Dirk Howell threatened them with reprisals and

the neighbours said they did not want to pursue a complaint. No action was taken to reassure them how this could be done safely, with bail conditions in place.

- 3.23 Dirk Howell was observed by members of the public behaving in an aggressive way towards Alfie, on one occasion whilst drunk. He gave false names, and although he was identified, the member of the public who had been intimidated did not wish to pursue a complaint. Thought should have been given about how to support these community members and again hold Dirk Howell to account. These were clear breaches of the child protection plan, but these incidents were treated as information, rather than cross referenced leading to a discussion about what needed to be done.
- 3.24 There were also incidents of violence to shop staff and train guards. These were responded to, and criminal processes instigated, but these were not seen holistically or in the round alongside all the other concerns.
- 3.25 There was intelligence of drug dealing by both Dirk Howell and Carla Scott, which was not shared with other professionals.
- 3.26 In October 2020 Dirk Howell was sentenced for a physical assault on a train guard that had occurred earlier in the year. He was sentenced to a community order and made subject to electronic monitoring with a curfew. This was never put in place, despite the multi-agency group believing that this provided some certainty about where he was.
- 3.27 There was insufficient consideration given to protecting Alfie by removing Dirk from the home through a proactive response to him. There was nothing to indicate that this information was brought together and then considered alongside the possible risks he presented to Alfie, so leading to positive action to manage Dirk through any local tasking process. Joint police and safeguarding professional liaison in the context of joint child protection enquiries is essential to keeping children safe.

**Learning Point 3:** Where an individual is managed by Probation Service, the Probation Service representative should be involved within the core group and strategy discussions.

**Recommendation 3:** Safeguarding Partners should strengthen processes by which intelligence held on those involved in the lives of children and young people on child protection plans is shared and used to reduce risk. This could be through a proactive approach to the management of the perpetrator, for example via local tasking processes. This should include a local awareness of the role of professional judgement in the offender management process.



#### **Theme 4: What does this review tell us about the effectiveness of the core group process in keeping children safe from harm?**

- 3.28 Alfie was subject to child protection planning for a period of 18-months. During this time monthly core group meetings were held. These were well attended by those who knew Alfie well. The role of the first core group is to develop the outline child protection plan discussed in the Initial Child Protection Conference and consider what needs to change, by how much and when in order for children to be safe. Subsequent core group meetings should monitor progress, evaluate whether the child protection plan is creating positive change for the child/children and consider the need to refine the plan in the light of new information or emerging concerns.
- 3.29 Over time there was little evidence that the child protection plan was being complied with. The plan proposed (and this varied little across the review):
- **Carla Scott to ensure that Dirk Howell did not stay in the home overnight;** there were several allegations of concern that led to police call outs late at night. There was either evidence that Dirk Howell was there or had been there. It was clear that he was staying overnight.
  - **Carla Scott was to ask Dirk Howell to leave if he was aggressive or call the police/social worker;** there were numerous incidents where Dirk was aggressive and physically abusive to Alfie, Carla Scott was present and chose not to report them.
  - **Carla Scott was to be open and honest with professionals:** Carla consistently lied to professionals, and this was always known.
  - **Carla Scott to supervise contact between Alfie and Dirk Howell;** there was evidence that Dirk was seen with Alfie on his own.
  - **Dirk Howell was not to smoke cannabis in the home: there was consistent evidence that cannabis was being smoked in the home.** This was never discussed and the implications for Alfie never considered. Cannabis emerges as a critical factor in many reviews of serious incidents with professionals consistently underestimating its significance in undermining the safety of children.
  - **Carla Scott was to be the only person to set boundaries in the home and impose discipline.** There were consistent allegations that Dirk Howell was harshly and cruelly disciplining Alfie.
    - **The Review Legal Planning meeting which took place in July added some extra requirements to the child protection plan.**
  - **Dirk Howell was to undertake parenting classes, attend an anger management programme, attend core groups and engage with the social worker:** he did not comply with any of these requirements, despite them being in place for a period of 7 months.
  - **Carla Scott was to undertake domestic abuse work;** she only attended one session.

- 3.30 The core groups were incident led. They focussed on what had happened in the preceding month. There was insufficient focus on the cumulative impact of these incidents on Alfie, and the effectiveness of the child protection plan was not discussed or reviewed. There was no acknowledgement of the wholesale lack of compliance with the plan by Carla Scott and Dirk Howell and therefore what needed to be done about it. There were no consequences for Carla or Dirk, who continued to disregard the plan intended to keep Alfie safe.
- 3.31 The focus on incidents meant that the core group did not sufficiently consider Alfie's lived experience. What were the implications of the concerns raised and what did it mean for Alfie? The exception was the concern that Alfie was being coached not to say what was happening at home, but there was no plan to address this, and it was not included in the child protection plan as something that needed to be addressed. This is something which will be picked up separately.
- 3.32 There was little dissent in the core group with the agreed plan. The Headteacher from Alfie's school did raise concerns about the increasing risks and evidence of harm in February 2020 and this led to an escalation of concerns and a legal planning meeting. This was good practice on the part of the Headteacher. The legal planning meeting decided that the legal threshold for removal had not been met, and the child protection plan continued. This took place under the constraints of the COVID pandemic, and a true picture of the risk Dirk Howell posed did not emerge.
- 3.33 There is a clear process to be followed in Worcestershire when there is a lack of progress in the child protection plan or a lack of compliance. This process starts with a discussion with the parents, raising the concern with a team manager, the Independent Chair of the Child Protection Conference or a case management meeting. None of these things happened.
- 3.34 Carla Scott attended all core groups. This was an influential factor. She would often leave the virtual meeting when incidents of concern about Dirk Howell were discussed. It was agreed that an Advocate would be provided to support her and to ensure her voice was heard. This made no difference to Carla Scott's response to the meetings, but the Advocate did a good job of reinforcing why professionals were concerned and to focus Carla Scott on the needs of Alfie. Core group professionals were asked to think sensitively about information sharing to enable Carla Scott to feel comfortable in the meeting, which left professionals feeling that they could not raise concerns. This was not helpful. Although it is important to ensure that parents feel able to attend meetings, and to make this as comfortable as possible and emotionally safe for them, the core focus needs to be the progress of the child protection plan and improved outcomes for the child/children involved. Professionals need to be confident to raise their concerns even where this is difficult for parents to hear.
- 3.35 The core groups were also held virtually due to the COVID pandemic. Professionals involved told the reviewer this made it difficult to address concerns, there were

worries that Dirk Howell was with Carla Scott whilst she was on the phone and was having some influence over her responses. Online meetings where Carla Scott was at home seemed to bring a lack of formality to the meeting which made it hard for professionals to gauge what was going on for Alfie.

- 3.36 There is lack of evidence in the information provided by the partnership to the review about how well the child protection plan and the outcomes/progress of this was explained to Alfie, for whom it was intended to provide safety, or what he thought about it. The way in which this information is shared with children needs to be clearly recorded. One of the most important issues for children is to see their parents engaging in change activity, despite this being hard, to improve their lives and increase their safety. It is a form of reflection functioning, the ability of parents to bear their children's needs in mind. Parental inability to do this undermines attachment and parent-child relationships and a lack of compliance with plans designed to increase children's safety and improve their developmental outcomes needs to be seen as a neglect of children's emotional needs.

Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership has developed a guide for professionals on the Child Protection process, including their responsibilities at core group meetings. This will help focus all professionals on the purpose of these meetings and the need for effective challenge.

**Recommendation 4:** WSCP should assure itself that multi-agency staff are being prepared for their role in core groups, that those attending have the appropriate position within their own organisation, training, and understanding of the purpose of a core group and its relationship to the child protection plan to ensure a move away from a focus on descriptions of what has happened to a focus on the child protection plan and ensuring that it delivers improvements in the child's life which are evident and tangible. Multi-agency professionals need to feel confident to drive the content of the plan and ensure that a lack of compliance with the plan is addressed.

#### **Theme 5: Responding to physical abuse.**

- 3.37 Concerns that either Dirk Howell or Carla Scott could be or were physically abusing Alfie was never sufficiently articulated across the whole of the review period. This is surprising given how much was known about Dirk Howell's violence and the evidence that he was aggressive to professionals and quick to violence when challenged in the community. There was discussion of aggression, not physical abuse. Alfie was made subject to child protection plans for neglect, not physical abuse. It remains unclear why this was the case.
- 3.38 There were six known incidents of concern raised with the police or children's services about neighbours or school staff concerns about physical abuse or Dirk Howell's harsh and cruel practices to Alfie. Each incident would be followed up by a police or social worker visit. There was inconsistency when Alfie was spoken to, made complicated by his age and on some occasions the lateness in the day of the visit. Too

often he was described as 'safe and well' when he had not been spoken to. The police did not always follow through on injuries noted to Alfie. There were always causal explanations given by Alfie or Carla Scott, but given the context, there should have been more thought given to ensuring that injuries were checked through medical examination. These incidents should have led to a strategy discussion and consideration of the need for child protection medicals.

- 3.39 Information was always shared with the lead social worker who visited either the home or Alfie at school. He was always seen alone. There were times that the explanation of injuries was slightly inconsistent or hesitant and that Alfie's demeanour was of slight concern. These did not lead to a strategy discussion or thoughts of the need for a child protection medical. The physical abuse by Carla Scott and Dirk Howell was not responded to in an authoritative way.
- 3.40 Where the context is allegations of physical abuse, the explanation for injuries is not quite consistent or corroborated and the child's demeanour is of concern there should always be a strategy discussion with multi-agency thought given to a child protection medical.
- 3.41 There was a discussion held about whether it was legitimate or legal to ask parents not to use physical means to discipline Alfie. Using physical means to discipline children is both harmful developmentally and ineffective<sup>v</sup>. There is often confusion in the assessment of these situations; professionals can assume that the intention of parents/caregivers is a disciplinary approach, helping children understand the need to change their behaviour and the intention is to teach or educate. There are times when parents describe using physical means as a means of discipline, caused by their children's behaviour, but the reality is that the response is out of proportion to the behaviour of the child and the intention is not teaching, but harm, shame, humiliation and abuse. Good assessment is required to distinguish between the two and an authoritative professional approach is required to challenge the physical abuse of children.

**Recommendation 5:** Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership should seek assurance that professionals are aware of when a strategy discussion and child protection medical is required in relation to injuries for children and young people. These decisions should consider the context of the concerns raised, any discrepancies in explanation and other information available, and the demeanour and presentation of the child/young person. Care should be taken about how much weighting should be given to the child's explanation or denial of concerns.

**Recommendation 6:** Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership provides support to professionals about effective assessment processes to distinguish between the misplaced use of physical chastisement as a way of responding to behavioural concerns and the use of physical abuse intended to humiliate and harm children, to help distinguish between what is lawful and proportionate and what is harmful and abusive.

**Theme 6: Addressing the over reliance on children to tell us what is happening to them through a focus on the importance of professionals triangulating information, including children’s lived experience, information from other sources and knowledge of child development.**

- 3.42 Children are never responsible for telling professionals what is happening to them when they are being abused; this is far too big a responsibility. They should reasonably expect that professionals will weigh up the available evidence, alongside understand their lived experience, bringing knowledge about child development and also hearing children’s views about their circumstances. It is the triangulation of this information that is important. Children should understand that professionals will see beyond superficial reassurances that all is okay at home made by parents and carers, and the times when children are coached to provide a false or inaccurate picture. In the period under review there was an over reliance on Alfie to share concerns and evidence that he was being abused and harmed. He was consistently asked if he had any worries, whether he liked Dirk Howell and what had happened in the context of allegations of abuse and aggression. There was increasing evidence that Alfie was cautious about what he said, seemed anxious when asked about home and worried about saying the wrong thing. This was acknowledged and discussed as a concern by the social worker and core group, but no new approach or action was agreed, and it was not really part of the risk analysis, particularly in crucial moments like the child protection conference and the Legal Planning process. Professionals did not seem certain of what could and should be done about this.
- 3.43 When Alfie spoke about being hit by Carla Scott, this led to no discernible action from his perspective. Carla Scott was informed of what Alfie had told professionals without discussion of whether this put him at risk of reprisal. Given his nervousness and distress at times, which was so well described in the school nurse health assessment in preparation for the strategy meeting in March 2020, more thought needed to be given to the potential outcome of sharing this information with Carla Scott and by association with Dirk Howell. It is acknowledged that this is not an easy practice point, as it is important to share information of concern with parents and challenge their views and information they as the parent are presenting, but considering the consequences of what children report is of concern at home, and how this is managed, this is a key child focussed issue.
- 3.44 Help seeking behaviour is a normal developmental task, where children learn who to trust to seek help from. This help seeking behaviour can be interrupted by early abuse and neglect, where the behaviour is responded to either by harshness, cruelty or indifference. Professionals have a role to ensure that children become confident and secure, by ensuring that when children tell us that they have been harmed or are worried, that action is taken to respond (as opposed to the often used no further action because agency thresholds have not been met) and this action considers a child’s safety and ability to trust professionals. This did not happen here.

- 3.45 There were several incidents where Dirk Howell's aggression was witnessed by others, and such was the seriousness of it, that they risked their own safety to challenge him. In these situations, it would have been expected that Alfie would have said he was frightened. The adults certainly were. It was the absence of Alfie not talking about scary and frightening incidents which should have been of concern. Throughout the review process there was an absence of discussion of Alfie's lived experience and reflection on the contrast between what was known about what life was like and what he said about it.
- 3.46 Reviews of serious incidents have highlighted that children often do not feel able to tell adults and professionals what is happening to them. This is either through poor trust of adults, fear and intimidation or not having the words. It should not be the child's responsibility to tell professionals when they are being abused. It is the responsibility of the professionals to collect and weigh up the evidence and make a professional judgement about the likely risk of abuse.

**Recommendation 7:** Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership should provide development for practitioners across agencies, for example learning events and briefings, to promote an understanding of the relative weighting to be given to evidence of concern, professional judgement, and direct disclosure of harm, whether it be in relation to a child or victim of Domestic Abuse. All need to be considered and weighted by the multi-agency group to inform child protection planning.

#### **Themes 7: Responding to concerns from friends and neighbours.**

- 3.47 This review has found that friends, neighbours and people in the community took great risks to ensure that Alfie could be safe, and abuse and neglect addressed. The review would like to thank them for all that they did, with the risk of violence and retribution from Dirk Howell.
- 3.48 When Dirk Howell threatened the neighbours with violence and arson, they said they did not want to pursue a complaint because they were worried about repercussions. More could have been done to support them through a discussion of bail conditions and protective action. Once again Dirk Howell was not held to account for his actions.
- 3.49 It is important that friends, neighbours and people in the community are encouraged to share concerns about children being abused. This is part of the whole focus on 'safeguarding being everyone's business'. Yet these people are disadvantaged by not knowing what will happen because of their reporting of concerns. They are reliant on professionals to take their concerns seriously, and unlike professionals have no way of challenging what has or has not happened. A similar issue was identified within the National Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel's report Child Protection in England (May 2022), albeit on that occasion it was the concerns of family members, rather than neighbours.
- 3.50 These referrals of concern were always responded to, they were discussed with Carla Scott who consistently denied they had taken place, despite the evidence. Alfie was

seen alone, often some days after the incident had occurred, and as has already been covered, he made no disclosures of concern. In the absence of disclosures, the lack of weighting applied to the reports from neighbours led ultimately to a lack of direct challenge to Carla Scott and Dirk Howell when the allegations being made were denied. Neither Dirk Howell nor Carla Scott was held to account. There was no review of the child protection plan that reflected these denials and analysed the potential implications for Alfie's safety. The child protection plan therefore remained the same.

**Recommendation 8:** Worcestershire Safeguarding Children Partnership should provide guidance to practitioners on how they can strengthen child protection plans by supporting family members and neighbours to formalise reports of concerns through other measures which offer reassurance, support and protection.

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## References:

<sup>i</sup> [50177948 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/inspections/50177948)

<sup>ii</sup> [The Myth of Invisible Men \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/103422/the-myth-of-invisible-men.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> Broadhurst, K., White, S., Fish, S., Munro, E., Fletcher, K., & Lincoln, H. (2010). Ten pitfalls and how to avoid them: What research tells us. National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

<sup>iv</sup> [Child Protection in England - May 2022 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/103422/child-protection-in-england-may-2022.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> [Children Are Unbeatable! | Home](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/children-are-unbeatable/)