

Introduction

This briefing draws on learning from an Appreciative Inquiry review into the experiences of “Christine”, a young person who became vulnerable following her primary carer’s imprisonment at the age of 14. Christine had been living by herself for almost four years and remained largely unnoticed by services until she was nearly 18, when she faced the risk of homelessness. The review aimed to identify missed opportunities, strengths, and system improvements to prevent similar situations occurring in the future.

Key Lines of Enquiry

The review explored six central questions:

- How well did agencies understand the child’s lived experience?
- Was professional curiosity evident in practice?
- How effective was inter-agency communication and coordination?
- What role did criminal justice services play and how well did they link into safeguarding?
- How effective was engagement from education and health with the child and family?
- Were there systems and structural issues that impacted on decision-making and safeguarding responses?

Voice of 'Christine'

Attempts were made to include Christine's perspective in this review, but she chose not to participate. She explained that she had already spoken to many professionals and did not feel it would make a difference for her. It is important to respect this decision and recognise the impact that repeated requests for her voice may have had.

However, Christine did share her views in a meaningful conversation with professionals involved in her care. The reflections captured here provide an important window into her experiences and how she felt about the support she received.

Her words remind us of the challenges young people face when trying to navigate life with limited support, and they highlight how professional responses can feel from their perspective:

"Family and friends knew I was living alone. My dad's girlfriend used to pop in and make me food and my dad used to send me money to buy food. I felt abandoned, on my own. Sometimes people would come to the door and I wouldn't answer it. I kept myself to myself. I didn't make friends, just talked to people at school and college because I was worried that they would want to know why I lived on my own. The first social worker tried to talk to me about independent living and needing someone to look after me, but I had been living on my own for 4 years! I felt like she didn't see me as an adult, just treated me like a child. It got better when I spoke to the senior manager."

Christine's reflections underline the importance of professionals taking time to see and hear the whole person, recognising their lived reality, and ensuring that support is offered in ways that feel respectful and empowering. Christine's experiences, alongside the wider evidence gathered in this review, highlight important areas of learning for agencies and professionals. The following section sets out the key findings and the steps being taken to strengthen practice.



Findings

Professional Curiosity: Gaps were identified in exploring family circumstances in depth. Reliance on single-source disclosures, missed home visits, and assumptions about resilience masked significant risks.

Information Sharing: The absence of key partners in both information sharing for the referral and subsequently in the Appreciative Inquiry itself, mirrors operational issues where key partners are not always present for decision making. This had an impact on the quality of information and expertise to make informed decisions about next steps.

Verification Processes: Limited awareness across services meant Christine's living arrangements were not recognised as a safeguarding concern. There were missed opportunities to check and confirm who held parental responsibility or who the key carers were.

Criminal Justice Links: Pathways from prison and probation services into children's social care were unclear, and dependents of those in custody were not consistently identified.

Systemic Issues: Communication between agencies was inconsistent. Assumptions were made about referrals being actioned without follow-up. Services often worked in silo rather than as part of a coordinated multi-agency response.

Strengths: Christine demonstrated remarkable resilience, continuing with her education and accessing therapeutic support from college counselling services. This support played an important role, although reliance on her resilience risked obscuring her vulnerabilities.

Improving Practice

What has been done

- Safeguarding teams in education settings are embedding new processes for checking care arrangements and raising awareness of private fostering.
- Social care has audited referrals, with a particular focus on children connected to custody incidents, and is integrating findings into its early help model.
- Health safeguarding professionals have shared the learning and actions from

What professionals can do

- **Apply professional curiosity:** Look beyond presenting information, triangulate evidence, and avoid assumptions.
- **Challenge “resilience” labels:** Recognise that coping behaviours may mask risk and unmet need.
- **Verify carers:** Always check who is providing day-to-day care, and ensure records are accurate and up to date.
- **Follow up referrals:** Making a referral is not the end of responsibility. Practitioners should check outcomes and remain part of the safeguarding network.
- **Language matters:** Shift from “did not

this case with GP staff through existing modes of GP learning and reflection, including peer supervision and training.

- Police are reviewing how family context is considered across custody and domestic abuse portfolios, with a focus on identifying dependents.
- Training materials are being developed around private fostering and informal care arrangements, supported with additional resources.

engage” to “unable to engage” to place responsibility on professionals to adapt their approach.

- **Escalate non-response:** Where young people disengage, consider further visits or contact methods, rather than closing a case.
- **Strengthen communication:** Speak directly with colleagues across agencies to confirm understanding, rather than assuming information has been received or acted upon.
- **Self Reflection:** Reflecting on unconscious bias towards a situation and recognising what informs that response. How do social graces influence the way assessments are made?

Remember the Voice of the Child

Ensure children understand the **purpose and format** of engagement opportunities.

Acknowledge the **emotional impact** of past experiences when seeking their voice.

Recognise that **silence, disengagement, or withdrawal** from services is a form of communication that requires a **trauma-informed response**.