

**Quality, Standards and Performance**

**Children’s Services**

**Audit Learning Outcomes**

**Introduction:**

This is a report in respect of two children, Child B and C who have been subject to a Special Guardianship Order in favour of their maternal aunt and uncle, Mr & Mrs Z, since December 2020. The placement is currently on the brink of breakdown and this report highlights the background to the SGO, the current situation and the learning from audit.

**Case File Audit**

Child B and Child Caged 8 and 4 years have been residing with their maternal aunt and uncle under a SGO granted on Dec 2020. This follows a history of concerns due to their mother’s chronic drug & alcohol problem, chaotic lifestyle and anti-social behaviour. Mother has four older children who have resided with their biological father since 2014. Mother has no contact and the older half siblings are not known to Child B and Child C.

The children’s father died in bed from a heart attack (there are inferences to this being drug related) in August 2018 whilst both were asleep in the home.

From 2019, Child B and Child C were on repeat CP Plans and subject to PLO process due to their mother’s repeated and consistent cocaine misuse and anti-social behaviour. This resulted in the court granting a SGO to maternal aunt and uncle, Mr & Mrs Z, in December 2020 with both children immediately moving into the Mr and Mrs Z’s family home, against their mother’s wishes as she would have ‘preferred her children to be with foster carers’. The SGO awarded mother overnight staying contact with the family on Christmas Eve & New Year’s Eve 2020. However, this was suspended on due to mother’s emotional dysregulation and verbal abuse towards Mrs Z.

There appears to be an initial ‘honeymoon’ period where the family appear to be settled. Mother has had regular virtual contact since the beginning of 2021 which has brought challenges as she invites unknown strangers online during the process which causes safety concerns, and this, together with increasing tensions between the cousins, resulted in home life slowly unravelling due to the challenging circumstances below:

* Maternal aunt and uncle live in a small two bedroomed flat and have two sons who share a bedroom aged 13 and nearly 12 years.
* Since the SGO, this one bedroom now additionally serves Child B, 8 years and Child C, 4 years – with four children sleeping in one room.
* There had been emerging concerns regarding Child B’s presenting anger which results in her punching, kicking and screaming for as long as two hours at a time; her sending concerning messages to school friends ‘your grandad deserves to die, and you should kill yourself’ reported by a parent. Or that she behaved much older than her years and talked about sex’.
* Mother and maternal aunt have a history of acrimony – and mother was already stating she wanted her children to go into care rather than live with maternal aunt so there was always going to be issues around contact.
* Maternal aunt and maternal grandfather who is a support to the family and part of their ‘bubble’ during the lockdown, are ex-army professionals who enjoy a structured environment– whereas Child B and Child C have lived with chaos since birth.
* Maternal uncle works from home and needed his space which would put added strain on the household.

**Placement Breakdown:**

On 06/04/2021, maternal aunt contacted the department stating the placement was at breaking point, explaining:

* ‘I just can’t do it’ and described how It wasn’t explained to her that the children would be with her until they were 18 years of age - as she thought it would be only until mother ‘*got herself together’*.
* Living conditions described as impossible.
* Mrs Z’s sons were not coping with having Child B and Child C in the home. One had become very angry and kicking furniture around and the other upset and crying.
* Relationships between Child B and Child C and their cousins has broken down.

**Feedback from social worker for SGO:**

Having worked tirelessly on the case it is explained by the previously allocated Court social worker she had, and still has, a good relationship with Mrs Z, that although a positive SGO report was presented, this was based on certain conditions being met. Despite this, a positive assessment was filed with the court and it was agreed that a Child in Need plan would provide the required additional support. Unfortunately, due to mother significantly relapsing Child B and Child C were moved into the placement prematurely by the court who granted the SGO regardless, of a support package was set up which should have been as follows:

* A housing application to be made for a 3/4 bedroomed property as a priority as it would be untenable to have four children in one bedroom.
* Supports to be in place for Child B and Child C for bereavement counselling and support.
* Direct work with Child B and Child C to address any issues from living in a new family environment.
* Contact to be closely managed and monitored.
* Respite to be set up so maternal aunt and uncle had some space to be a family.

Mrs Z is angry and disappointed in the local authority’s service delivery, and from recent communication appears conflicted. On the one hand, she would like Child B and Child C to move to foster parents as soon as possible, and on the other is anxious that they remain with her until they have a permanent placement that is within the vicinity of the Z’s family home and the children’s school.

Housing have recently agreed to grade the family as ‘band A’ for transfer to a four-bedded property but Mrs Z is saying this does not make any difference to her current decision. However, she is also rejecting current foster placements as ‘too far or not permanent enough’, so would she reconsider keeping Child B and Child C if a larger property was found and support provided – we need to explore?

**Learning from Audit**

**What should have been done differently and who by, and at what point:**

What worked well?

* Court team assessing social worker applied evidences good ‘relationship-based’ practice
* SGO assessment timely with a good understanding of the ‘presenting’ family situation and a solution focused outcome
* SGO social worker aware of shortfalls and had a plan in place to support the placement.
* Children initially safeguarded following mother’s drug misuse relapse

What we are worried about?

* SGO assessment ‘optimistic’ without the support package in place
* SGO takes a ‘face value’ approach to the Z’s families positive family narrative
* SGO report does not provide professional challenge in how maternal grandfather was going to be a ‘mediator’ when he already had a fractured relationship with the children’s mother
* Family described as ‘ex-military and structured’. How was Child B and Child C who have lived a chaotic lifestyle going to manage structure?
* Despite maternal aunt describing how the family resolved their problems, how was she going to manage Child B’s increasing challenging behaviour?

What needed to happen?

* Social workers to look beyond the presentation of the family and dig ‘deeper’ into the family history, relationships and dynamics during the SGO assessment process.
* Assessing social worker should challenge ‘the happy family’ narrative and how realistic was it that they would resolve all their issues ‘in house’?
* We should have listened more actively when maternal aunt says ‘she takes on too much’ and applied professional challenge: ‘*is this the case with Child B and Child C*?
* We must ensure support packages are always set up prior to the granting of orders
* We should find the confidence to apply legal challenge when courts make directions against the wishes of the L/A

**Was this breakdown preventable**:

What worked well:

* Social work made recommendation to the court for a CIN plan to run alongside SGO for first six months which was positive
* Social worker requested a ‘testing period’ before granting the application (denied by Judge Venables)
* Maternal aunt had good relationship with social worker who supported the placement
* SGO assessment was undertaken during a pandemic lockdown that brought its own challenges which social workers overcame

What we are worried about:

* The court process overruled social workers concerns re family vulnerability
* SGO granted without support and help re CIN Plan in place
* Maternal aunt recently states that the placement breakdown is due to a change in social worker, whereas the newly allocated social workers report maternal aunt refused to engage despite numerous communications.
* Maternal aunt stating she believed the placement was not permanent but only until ‘mother was better’.

What needs to happen:

* Assessments must look forensically into family history and relationships to ensure a placement is viable
* Ensure we have support packages in place in future to avoid placement breakdowns
* L/A to ‘push back’ inappropriate and untimely court decisions
* Ensure that placements are sustainable and not dependent on individual social worker’s practice

**The quality of the SGO assessment:**

What worked well:

* SGO addresses Child B and Child C’s wishes and feelings
* The Z family story is narrated, and maternal cousins interviewed
* SGO assessment gives clarity on family’s position in wanting the children to live with them.

What we are worried about:

* Although, SGO does question practically how four children were realistically going to sleep in one bedroom, it does not explore the socio-emotional challenges regarding privacy, homework, friendships, the older boy’s puberty onset?
* The underlying tensions relating to maternal aunt, maternal grandfather and mother’s relationships is complex – with intermittent family breakdowns which would impact on the children
* Maternal aunt’s comments that ‘she cares too much and takes on too much’ were not explored

What needs to happen:

* SGO to look beyond surface information with families
* SGO quality to be based on analysis and reflection beyond the family positive narrative
* Challenge ‘unconscious bias’, re the ‘happy family’ messages the Z family presented which were not sustained
* In assessment apply emotional intelligence in assessing how would a family cope living together with four children sleeping in one bedroom, two family dogs and maternal uncle working from home – all during a national lockdown.

**The court decision making:**

What worked well:

* The court process was timely

What we are worried about:

* The courts supported the positive application in its entirety and made no legal challenge regarding the unrealistic expectations to be placed on the Z family re SGO.
* The court ruling that mother would have overnight staying contact Christmas and NYE 2020 was wholly unrealistic as relationships had already broken down
* The local authority has been ‘railroaded’ by the court directive rather than being in a position to provide a more measured and realistic timely plan for Child B and Child C

What needs to happen:

* The local authority should apply appropriate legal challenge to the courts when decisions override social work recommendations.
* Social workers should have a link to senior management to support them with legal challenge

**The quality of the decision in relation to permanence:**

What worked well:

* The family, in their language and presentation, wholeheartedly wanted Child B and Child C to remain within their family network, which was adopted by the social work professionals

What we are worried about:

* The speed in maternal aunt’s ‘turnaround’ in wanting Child B and Child C removed from her home
* The unrealistic, already overcrowded home environment

What needs to happen?

* In assessing children and young people’s future permanency alongside information led reports, use ‘professional curiosity’ rather than passive acceptance of family presentation
* Be mindful of conscious and unconscious bias between social worker and families re social work ‘buy in’ to the happy family narrative.

**Any issues about the joint working across teams, transfer points etc:**

What worked well:

* The outgoing social worker from the court team remained in contact with maternal aunt long after what should have been the transfer process for continuity and consistency
* The newly allocated Help & Protection Team Manager is currently engaging positively with maternal aunt

What we are worried about:

* Maternal aunt cites the transfer process as the result of the placement breakdown
* If the placement was dependent on one particular social worker it would have always been unsustainable

What needs to happen:

* Have meaningful dialogue around the transfer process so any sensitives or vulnerabilities that could lead to case placement breakdowns are addressed and handovers managed accordingly

**Analysis:**

Child B and Child C have endured a life of instability and insecurity from their mother’s chronic alcohol & drug misuse – and their father’s premature death.

Mr and Mrs Z, albeit optimistically, put themselves forward to provide a home for the children. However, it is unlikely that this would have worked in the long term due to the set of circumstances listed above.

The family court failed to take into account the challenges, complexities and demands Mr and Mrs Z would face caring for Child B and Child C and the local authority was directed to move the children in with Mr & Mrs Z immediately, rather than be in a position to introduce a more measured, timely plan and approach. The placement initially provided Child B and Child C with the stability and security they needed although this has proved to be unsustainable due to the lack of support and resources to underpin the SGO as well as the change in social worker, who Mrs Z obviously found to be a great support.

Mr & Mrs Z and maternal grandfather were eager to have to children live with them. However, the SGO assessment does not explore how they would really sustain the placement when faced with quite complex and challenging issues and problems and it is questionable now whether Child B and Child C will remain with their aunt and uncle, or move into foster care, which was mother’s original request.

**Recommendations:**

It is vital that whatever the outcome, Child B and Child C continue to have relationships with their aunts, uncle and cousins. Therefore:

* Provide a service to undertake restorative family work for Mr & Mrs Z, maternal cousins and Child B and Child C as soon as possible.
* If Child B and Child C are to be moved, which is likely, ensure this is undertaken in a planned and measured way.
* Child B and Child C to continue to have contact with Mr and Mrs Z and cousins and even consider shared care
* Child B and Child C to continue to have contact with mother.
* Explore data for SGO’s to see if they lead to successful placements, or not?
* Introduce ‘testing periods’ in SGO’s prior to successful applications
* Professional development team to work alongside social worker professionals in exploring ‘professional curiosity and challenge’ in SGO assessments and case work
* Use supervision to challenge social work ‘confirmation bias’ & ‘unconscious bias’ regarding what our service users tell us?
* Consider setting up ‘beyond the words’ workshops for social workers to exercise their ‘practice wisdom’ in assessing what families *‘don’t say’* to us, rather than relying on their presenting dialogue and language.
* The transfer process to be mindful of case disruption due to change of social worker.