



Briefing on Learning from Child Safeguarding Practice Review

Leiland-James Michael Corkill

Background

Leiland-James Corkill was thirteen months old when he sadly died. He died in the care of Cumbria County Council whilst placed with assessed and approved prospective adopters, Scott and Laura Castle. Leiland-James had been living with the couple for five months when he died as a result of physical abuse perpetrated by Laura Castle. Laura Castle, was subsequently found guilty of his murder and of child cruelty and jailed for life, with a minimum term of 18 years. Scott Castle was not subject to criminal charges.

A Child Safeguarding Practice Review (CSPR) by Cumbria Safeguarding Children Partnership was undertaken using the SILP (Significant Incident Learning Process)¹.

The Review concluded that:

Leiland-James died while being cared for by a couple who had been successfully assessed and who were being supported by professionals and their own network. Following his move, indicators emerged that it might not progress to be the right placement for Leiland-James, and that his longer-term emotional needs may not be met. There were no known indicators that Leiland-James was at risk of physical harm from his carers, however. What was not known at the time was that the prospective adopters had not been honest about their debt, their mental and physical health, their alcohol consumption and use of physical chastisement during the assessment, at the time of Leiland-James being matched with them or during his time living with the family. Learning has been identified that information in these areas should be robustly sought, shared, and considered. This is significant, as had the information... been known, along with the understanding that the prospective adopters were hiding these issues, the assessment could have better reflected the vulnerabilities and potential risks.

¹ [Cumbria LCSPR Report - Leiland-James Michael Corkill](#)

The CSPR references 13 'Learning' points that informed 4 general recommendations for changes to practice, one national recommendation relating to strengthening statutory guidance and 5 recommendations relating to local practice for partners in Cumbria. This Briefing identifies lessons to be learnt from the tragic death of Leiland-James relevant to practice and processes currently used by the Adopt North East Regional Adoption Agency, detailing a number of actions that will be taken.

However, it is of significant note that in her response to the Review, the Children's Commissioner observed:

Perhaps the strongest theme to come from [the Review] is the need, as ever, for social workers to be able to see children, understand them, follow their professional curiosity and instincts. A culture that supports this is more important than any process².

The Agency affirms this learning point as key and commits to supporting its social workers to practice with healthy scepticism and respectful uncertainty (Laming 2003) through the use of regular reflective Case Supervision³.

Summary of Actions to be taken by Adopt North East in light of learning from the Child Safeguarding Practice Review (CSPR)

All Actions will be subject to an Implementation Plan with a nominated Lead Officer and clear timescale, with all actions implemented no later than 30 November 2022.

Adopt North East will:

- 1. ask all enquirers to 'Detail all current and past medical issues for which you have sought and/or received support from a health or care professional' as part of the Initial Contact and Initial Meeting Record**

² <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2022/07/29/a-statement-on-the-murder-of-leiland-james-corkill/>

³ Reflective Supervision involves the uses of experience, reflection, analysis and action planning in which the Supervisor facilitates the Supervisee to reflect and acknowledge and process feelings, patterns and connections moving the Supervisee toward an understanding and contextualisation of 'why something happened and what it means' and generate and test different strategies towards goals to address 'what next' (Morrison 2005)

- 2. ensure that significant information self-reported by applicant adopters is, so far as is reasonably possible, corroborated by third party information and where this is not possible, this is clearly stated within the assessment**
- 3. continue to work with its Adoption Medical Advisors to strengthen practice relating to adopter medicals by General Practitioners**
- 4. will strengthen the process of regular review of approved adopters.**
- 5. will require third party providers of information at the assessment stage to update the Agency with any material change in circumstances relevant to an adopter's suitability to adopt that emerge after they have been approved and until the making of an Adoption Order or termination of suitability**
- 6. will ensure that at the Placement Planning Meeting, expectations around Notification are clarified and addressed and recorded as an action**
- 7. send a written invite to the new Health Visitor and prospective adopter's General Practitioner inviting them to attend the Placement Planning Meeting for a child. The Pro Forma will request that in lieu of attendance, any information deemed relevant by the health professional is shared in writing with the Chair**
- 8. ensure that its staff actively participate in the Looked After Child process**
- 9. ensure that the financial information obtained during assessment from applicant adopters includes any outstanding debts that may be owed, as well as information about the regular payments servicing such debts**
- 10. require that adopters' notify the Agency of any substantial changes in their income and expenditure that emerge after they have been approved and until the making of an Adoption Order or termination of approval**
- 11. continually seek to engage with existing children in placement until the making of an Adoption Order or termination of approval so that their voice and lived experience informs decision-making**

12. ensure that education and nursery professionals for existing children within the adoptive home are invited to participate in the Placement Planning Meeting for an adoptive child and that the needs of the existing children are considered and a plan developed to meet any identified needs
13. strengthen its use of Network Meetings to include review meetings that can identify whether the anticipated support from the network was forthcoming as anticipated
14. use its existing Friends and Family Training Course and Network Meetings to communicate to participant members of an adopters network the responsibility to share concerns with the Agency
15. review all current placements and ensure that vulnerable placements are appropriately supported
16. ensure that direct, in-person visits by Social Workers are proportionate to the identified needs of the placement, with vulnerable placements visited more frequently
17. strengthen the support available to adopters who self-report or are identified as struggling to bond or attach to a child placed into their care, reviewing, amending and updating the Adoption Support Plan as appropriate
18. will undertake 'unannounced Home Visits' to all placements to ensure that the lived experience of children in placement are robustly understood
19. will robustly and critically assess applicant adopters with a professional awareness of and ability to respond to disguised compliance
20. will ensure that both partners of a couple application to adopt are robustly assessed

Written Response to the Learning of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review (CSPR)

CSPR Learning Point 1

If a prospective adopter has had contact with a service providing mental health support or counselling, consideration should always be given to

requesting consent to contact the agency during the assessment to request information

Reflection and Lessons for Adopt North East

It is already established practice by Adopt North East to request information about an enquirer's current and historical mental health at the point of an Initial Contact with the Agency or subsequent Initial Meeting. This enables the Agency to share with the enquirer that should they decide to Register their Interest, consent will be sought from them for a check to be undertaken with their provider, whether current or historical.

However, from a review of pro forma Initial Contact and Initial Meeting Case Management Form, the question used by the Agency is phrased '*Do you have any current or past medical or mental health issues that you think we should be aware of?*' placing the emphasis on the enquirer to determine whether or not they consider information about their mental health relevant to be disclosed. In light of the learning from the CSPR, Adopt North East will reframe the question, removing this emphasis.

Action 1: Adopt North East will ask all enquirers to 'Detail all current and past medical issues for which you have sought and/or received support from a health or care professional' as part of the Initial Contact and Initial Meeting Record

CSPR Learning Point 2

Those providing therapeutic interventions to the parents of children should consider the impact on a child of what is reported, and clear information should be shared with the GP about reported alcohol consumption

Reflection and Lessons for Adopt North East

The CSPR identified that the alcohol consumption self-reported by the prospective adopters of Leiland-James differed between that stated to the Social Worker for the purposes of assessment as adopters and that stated to a mental health provider and health professional to access support services.

Arguably, this learning is broader than the CSPR suggests and emphasises the need for Adopt North East to seek to confirm, so far as is possible, not only the self-reporting of applicant adopters in relation to health but also in relation to all significant other self-reporting. The Agency should always be seeking to confirm self-reporting with information reasonably available from third parties.

In this way, the Agency will be able to identify and challenge any discrepancies that emerge. It is entirely understandable that applicant adopters will seek to minimise potential vulnerabilities and it is the responsibility of the Agency to ensure that assessments are robustly evidence-based.

Action 2: Adopt North East will ensure that significant information self-reported by applicant adopters is, so far as is reasonably possible, corroborated by third party information and where this is not possible, this is clearly stated within the assessment

CSPR Learning Point 3

It is important that the prospective adopter health assessments undertaken by GP's are allocated sufficient time to consider and record current health information

Reflection and Lessons for Adopt North East

Adopt North East holds regular meetings with its six Adoption Medical Advisors to review and strengthen practice. A recent example relates to the challenge the Medical Advisors were able to bring to bear on GPs who were unnecessarily delaying adopter medicals during the pandemic. The CSPR is a helpful reminder of the need for '*rigorous professional curiosity by the assessing Social Worker, GP and the Medical Advisor*' to ensure that the medical advice made available to Panel and to the Agency Decision Maker in relation to the health of adopters is of high quality. Adopt North East will continue to work with the Medical Advisors to ensure that the quality of practice of GPs in providing health information is as strong as possible.

Action 3: Adopt North East will continue to work with its Adoption Medical Advisors to strengthen practice relating to adopter medicals by General Practitioners

CSPR Learning Point 4

Any known potential vulnerabilities, including the physical and mental health of prospective adopters, should be formally reconsidered at the point of matching and at the child looked after review following placement to confirm if there have been any changes

Reflection and Lessons for Adopt North East

Adopters are approved as 'suitable to adopt' by Adopt North East at a particular point in time, based on the information available to the Agency that has been gathered during the preceding assessment process. Every effort is made to ensure that the information is as detailed and up-to-date as possible at the point of Agency Decision. However, learning from the CSPR noted of particular concern how an Agency considers changes in the 'physical and mental health of prospective adopters' following approval and as a consequence, recommended 'formal' reconsideration at key points in the child's journey.

Following robust reflection by the Agency about the process and practice of the identification and consideration of 'changes' in the circumstances – including but not limited to health issues – of approved adopters, the Agency notes the following:

- Approved adopters should be subject to regular review until the making of an Adoption Order or, where no placement occurs, termination of approval.
- Reviews should be undertaken by a Qualified Social Work Team Manager
- Reviews should be informed by up-to-date information – whilst approved adopters will not necessarily be subject to 'reassessment', a review should fundamentally review whether, in light of any updated information not available to the Agency Decision Maker at the point of approval, the approved adopters are 'still suitable to adopt'
- Reviews of adopters' continuing suitability where no child is placed should be six monthly, unless triggered by the need for an earlier Review (a significant change in circumstances comes to the attention of the Agency).
- Reviews of adopters' continuing suitability where a child is placed should be linked to the statutory Looked After Child Review Process (20 days, 3 months, 6 monthly).
- Reviews of adopters' continuing suitability should take place to inform consideration of Matching and consideration of an Adoption Order.
- Applicant Adopters and those approved by the Agency should be made aware of the need to notify the Agency of any material changes of their circumstances relevant to their approval, including but not limited to issues of health, employment, household, financial circumstances, network, accommodation, relationship and motivation to adopt
- Third party providers of information that informed an Agency Decision to approve adopters should be asked to notify the Agency should there be any material change in the information previously made available to the Agency – this requirement should be until the making of an Adoption Order or the termination of suitability

- New information may trigger a formal 'reassessment'
- The Agency should operate on the basis of continuous vigilance – with approval to adopt a dynamic rather than static status

Action 4: Adopt North East will strengthen the process of regular review of approved adopters

Action 5: Adopt North East will require third party providers of information at the assessment stage to update the Agency with any material change in circumstances relevant to an adopter's suitability to adopt that emerge after they have been approved and until the making of an Adoption Order or termination of suitability

CSPR Learning Point 5

The new Health Visitor who will be involved following a move to adopters and the prospective adopter's GP should be immediately notified about a planned placement. The new Health Visitor should be invited to the meeting planning introductions and the move. The Health Visitor and the GP should consider what pre-placement support they can provide and share any concerns or issues that they are aware of.

Reflection and Lessons for Adopt North East

It is established practice that the Local Authority responsible for a child in their care moving placement is responsible for notifying involved professionals about the new placement, including the date of the move, details of the new carers and the new placement address and relevant contact details. This practice should continue. However, in light of learning from the CSPR, the Placement Planning Meeting which decides on the practical arrangements for the move of a child should ensure that the task of Notification is specifically noted, detailing the Worker responsible and the timescale for completion.

It is not current practice to invite the new Health Visitor or prospective adopter's General Practitioner to a Placement Planning Meeting. The experience of the Agency suggests that neither health professional would be likely to attend. However, the CSPR is a useful reminder of the need to seek to involve health professionals in the placement planning process – accordingly, the Agency will send an invite to the Health Visitor and GP and request, in lieu of attendance, any information deemed relevant by the health professional is shared in writing with the Chair.

Action 6: Adopt North East will ensure that at the Placement Planning Meeting, expectations around Notification are clarified and addressed and recorded as an action

Action 7: Adopt North East will send a written invite to the new Health Visitor and prospective adopter's General Practitioner inviting them to attend the Placement Planning Meeting for a child. The Pro Forma will request that in lieu of attendance, any information deemed relevant by the health professional is shared in writing with the Chair.

CSPR Learning Point

It is important that all professionals across agencies understand the importance of their consideration and involvement in the cases of children who are in adoption placements. They remain children looked after until the adoption is made and require a focus of all professionals at this time

Reflection and Lessons for Adopt North East

It is established practice that the Local Authority responsible for a child in their care is primarily responsible for ensuring that all involved professionals continue to be actively and meaningfully engaged in the care planning and care of a Looked After Child. In light of learning from the CSPR, Adopt North East will ensure that its staff actively participate in the Looked After Child process, including Reviews, Care Team Meetings and Statutory Visits to the child.

Action 8: Adopt North East will ensure that its staff actively participate in the Looked After Child process

CSPR Learning Point 7

Information must be sought and considered in assessments [of the suitability to adopt] to ensure a full understanding of a prospective adopter's financial situation, which includes a clear and achievable plan for how any debt is to be managed.

Reflection and Lessons for Adopt North East

It is the established practice of Adopt North East that as part of the assessment of prospective adopters, a detailed consideration of their income and expenditure is undertaken, as required by Schedule 4(17) (AAR 2005). However, the CSPR highlighted that in the case of Leiland-James's adopters, the Adoption Agency did not 'clearly ask for the total money owed, rather it asked for how much money was being spent each month on loans and credit cards' and concluded this approach did 'not give the full picture and enabled

the family to disguise what they owed and that they were only paying a minimum amount each month, leading to the debt increasing'. As a result of this learning, Adopt North East will make sure that the financial information obtained during assessment includes any outstanding debts, as well as the payments servicing such debts.

As noted above, the CSPR raised concern about the issue of changes in the 'vulnerabilities' of prospective adopters' following approval. From this learning, Adopt North East will therefore change its practice to require that adopter's are required to notify the Agency of any substantial changes in their income and expenditure that emerge after they have been approved and until the making of an Adoption Order.

Action 9: Adopt North East will ensure that the financial information obtained during assessment from applicant adopters includes any outstanding debts that may be owed, as well as information about the regular payments servicing such debts.

Action 10: Adopt North East will require that adopters' notify the Agency of any substantial changes in their income and expenditure that emerge after they have been approved and until the making of an Adoption Order or their termination of approval

CSPR Learning Point 8

When prospective adopters have another child, that child should be engaged in an age-appropriate way to understand their day-to-day lived experience, at each stage of the process

Reflection and Lessons for Adopt North East

It is the established practice of Adopt North East that as part of the assessment process, the voice and lived experience of any existing children within the prospective adopter's household are sought and considered. The Agency's own learning from Disruptions has identified the impact of adoption on existing children as a potential vulnerability and therefore the voice and lived experience of existing children is a focus of consideration at both approval and at matching. The CSPR asserted that 'it would have been good practice' for further work with the existing child after approval, noting 'the review believes that there is a benefit of undertaking [further work with existing children] in all cases after a child has been placed', noting in support that the existing child in Leiland-James's placement was able to give 'a very clear account... about what was

happening in the home'. This recommendation is accepted. The Agency will change its practice to require continuous engagement with existing children following approval so that the voice and lived experience of existing children informs matching considerations and the application for an Adoption Order.

Action 11: Adopt North East will continually seek to engage with existing children in placement until the making of an Adoption Order or termination of approval so that their voice and lived experience informs decision-making

CSPR Learning Point 9

When a child who is on the care of the Local Authority is placed for adoption, there should be a multi-agency plan, to include health and schools

Reflection and Lessons for Adopt North East

It is established practice that Adopt North East and the Local Authority responsible for a child in their care hold a Placement Planning Meeting to plan for the move of a child to an adoptive placement. In light of learning from the CSPR, Placement Planning Meetings – which decides on the practical arrangements for the move of a child – should also include attendance and/or written information from education and nursery professionals for existing children within the adoptive home so that placement planning is strengthened and the wider support needs of existing children considered.

Action 12: Adopt North East will ensure that education and nursery professionals for existing children within the adoptive home are invited to participate in the Placement Planning Meeting for an adoptive child and that the needs of the existing children are considered and a plan developed to meet any identified needs

CSPR Learning Point 10

That wider family and friends' network are explicitly made aware of their responsibility to share any concerns with the local authority. Information about how they do this must be shared during the network meeting and in writing afterwards

Reflection and Lessons for Adopt North East

It is established practice that Adopt North East will, during assessment, identify the network of support available to applicant adopters, including the preparation

of an Ecomap. The Agency also offers Friends and Family Training to members of an adopter's network. Where it is deemed relevant and necessary – for example an application by a single adopter, a match of a child or children with greater complexity – the Agency will convene a 'Network Meeting' to assist in better understanding the support likely to be available to the adopters. The CSPR noted that in the case of Leiland-James's prospective adopters '*network meetings were held during the assessment and when the match was confirmed. They were well attended....*' but noted, '*There [was] no process of review... to ensure that the support offered is happening and to enable family members and friends to share any concerns....*'. It is not however the practice of the Agency to convene a Network Meeting post placement to review whether the support identified by the adopters had in fact become available as anticipated. Learning by the Agency around Disruptions suggests that convening a Network Meeting post placement may, on occasions, assist. It is arguable that this would be of particular value where a matching decision was based, in part, on the availability of support from the network of the prospective adopter or where the match was deemed to be of higher risk due to the needs of the child or the capacity of the adopters.

The CSPR noted that the Network Meetings for Leiland-James did not provide 'the network [with] some accountability to make sure that the plan is working' and this informed the learning that adopter support networks must be informed of 'their responsibility to share any concerns'. It is proposed that this message be emphasised within the Agency's Friends and Families Training Course as well as during any Network Meetings held.

Action 13: Adopt North East will strengthen its use of Network Meetings to include review meetings that can identify whether the anticipated support from the network was forthcoming as anticipated

Action 14: Adopt North East will use its existing Friends and Family Training Course and Network Meetings to communicate to participant members of an adopters network the responsibility to share concerns with the Agency

CSPR Learning Point 11

That the support of the health professionals involved with the child is requested to ensure that updated health information about the adopters is available at key stages of the process, such as child looked after reviews

Reflection and Lessons for Adopt North East

This learning mirrors that noted in Actions 5 and 7 respectively.

CSPR Learning Point 12

When a prospective adopter/s presents in a way that leads to concerns about the emotional care being provided to a child, there needs to be provision of an appropriate, more timely and robust response

Reflection and Lessons for Adopt North East

The CSPR noted the absolute need for a timely and proportionate response when concerns emerge about the care being provided to a child – the CSPR in particular noted the need for ‘*more direct [Social Work] contact with the child in a vulnerable placement than the minimum expected*’ and a ‘*timelier response*’ to issues of bonding and attachment. Whilst Adopt North East is experienced in responding to the needs of adopters following the placement of a child, including monitoring for emerging issues such as Post Adoption Depression Syndrome (PAD) and susceptibility to fatigue, the CSPR learning provides a welcome challenge, particularly around early signs and adopter self-reports of problems. The Agency will review how it ‘steps up’ visiting frequencies when post placement vulnerabilities emerge and whether interventions to support vulnerable children in placements are proportionate, timely and effective.

Action 15: Adopt North East will review all current placements and ensure that vulnerable placements are appropriately supported

Action 16 Adopt North East will ensure that direct, in-person visits by Social Workers are proportionate to the identified needs of the placement, with vulnerable placements visited more frequently

Action 17: Adopt North East will strengthen the support available to adopters who self-report or are identified as struggling to bond or attach to a child placed into their care, reviewing, amending and updating the Adoption Support Plan as appropriate

Action 18: Adopt North East will undertake ‘unannounced Home Visits’ to all placements to ensure that the lived experience of children in placement are robustly understood

Additional Reflective Learning Points for Adopt North East

Although the CSPR did not specifically refer to the issue of ‘disguised compliance’ it is clear from the Review that Scott and Laura Castle acted in ways which sought to minimise or avoid professional concerns during the assessment, matching and placement of Leiland-James. Disguised compliance is defined as the process of ‘*appearing to co-operate with professionals in order to allay concerns and stop professional engagement*’⁴. Disguised compliance is acknowledged and recognised to be particularly challenging for Social Workers – nevertheless the learning is emphatic: Social Workers must ‘*think the unthinkable*’ and ‘*believe and act upon what they see in front of them, rather than accept parental [or carer] versions of what was happening at home without robust challenge*’⁵. The role of the Social Worker is perhaps best articulated by Lord Laming as the practice of ‘respectful uncertainty’:

*‘While I accept that social workers are not detectives, I do not consider that they should simply serve as the passive recipients of information, unquestioningly accepting all that they are told by the carers of children about whom there are concerns. The concept of “respectful uncertainty” should lie at the heart of the relationship between the social worker and the family. It does not require social workers constantly to interrogate their clients, but it does involve the critical evaluation of information that they are given’*⁶

Action 19: Adopt North East will robustly and critically assess applicant adopters with a professional awareness of and ability to respond to disguised compliance

Finally, it is of note that the CSPR makes only minimal reference to Scott Castle, the male prospective adopter, throughout the Report. Whilst it is possible that there were good reasons for so doing, it is nevertheless the case that male parents and carers are often ‘missing’ from Social Work assessments⁷. Adopt North East will continue to ensure that both partners in couple applications to adopt are robustly assessed, with sessions with both together and also sessions with each partner individually.

⁴ Reder, P., Duncan, S. and Gray, M. (1993) Beyond blame: child abuse tragedies revisited London: Routledge

⁵ <https://pdscp.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/SCR-Daniel-Pelka-2013.pdf>

⁶ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/273183/5730.pdf

⁷ <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2018/02/19/working-fathers-key-advice-research/>

Action 20: Adopt North East will ensure that both partners to a couple application to adopt are robustly assessed

Reflective End Note

If this Briefing triggers concerns in relation to a child or young person with whom you are currently working, please ensure that you speak to a Team Manager as a matter of urgency to discuss your concerns.

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16 August 2022

Approval:

Adopt North East Management Group

23 August 2022

Agreement:

Operational Leadership Group of Partner Local Authorities

25 August 2022