Lessons Learned

Emily & Ryan's Story

Ryan (17) and Emily (16) have a long history of involvement with agencies due to parental domestic abuse, criminal damage, multiple missing episodes, substance misuse and exploitation. Both Emily and Ryan were referred to the National Referral Mechanism which resulted in a conclusive grounds decision where, on the balance of probabilities, there was sufficient information to conclude they were more likely than not victims of trafficking.

Ryan and Emily were in a relationship for over 12 months and knew each other before being accommodated by the local authority. The existence of the relationship was known to the agencies working with the young people and there were long-standing concerns that the relationship was violent and coercively controlling.

Emily eventually disclosed to Warwickshire Police that she had been raped multiple times over two-month period by Ryan. She provided video footage of two incidents and gave details of being assaulted by Ryan. Ryan had also threatened to harm her family. She confirmed that she had always denied the assaults in the past but wished to make a complaint now. Ryan was charged and pleaded guilty to rape and was subsequently convicted and sentenced to 4 years and nine months imprisonment. He is also required to sign on the Sex Offenders Register for life.

What we have learned...

Emily was identified as the victim in ten domestic abuse-related incidents, where Ryan was identified as the perpetrator. Some of these were recorded by Warwickshire Police but had occurred in the West Midlands force area, so were transferred to them for investigation. Often the reports were made by a third party and rarely came from Emily herself. However, of the 20 occasions Ryan was arrested and detained in custody, seven of those occasions were for assaults on Emily (not including the rape). These were referred to CPS where it was felt there was sufficient evidence for them to make a charging decision, however, CPS did not charge.
LEARNING POINT: ***The CPS decisions regarding the evidential threshold not being reached could have been appealed. The level of violence and threats clearly indicated a further serious assault was likely. All opportunities, including legal proceedings, should have been further explored.***

Emily was reported missing 13 times in the first month after she was placed in a foster home. During the period under review, she had 118 missing episodes and 43 Return Home Interviews (RHI's). Return home interviews are important, not only as a statutory requirement but also as a safeguarding check and an opportunity to build a relationship when a young person may be at their most vulnerable. In Emily's case, she benefited from a consistency of worker, in that most of the interviews were undertaken by a person that she grew to know and trust. This relationship proved to be important in understanding the level of abuse in Emily's relationship with Ryan and the Child Exploitation and Missing Team worker was able to pass on information to her allocated social worker and the Police.
LEARNING POINT: ***It was good practice to use the relationship Emily had developed with the practitioner from the Child Exploitation and Missing Team to attempt to introduce her to other resources and undertake work by proxy. This strategy should be reflected in procedures and considered when attempting to work with hard-to-reach young people.***

Lessons Learned (cont.)

What we have learned (contd.)...

An NRM referral was made by Ryan's social worker. The grounds for the referral were due to concerns that Ryan was a victim of Modern Slavery – Criminal Exploitation. The NRM referral was recorded by Warwickshire Police but was then overlooked due to the volume of other investigations involving Ryan. No warning markers were added to Police systems, and it is doubtful that any Police officer was aware that Ryan had had a positive or conclusive grounds decision. As a result, this NRM decision was not reflected in any of the forms used by the Police to seek advice from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS).
LEARNING POINT: The NRM is not a status, but a mechanism for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and exploitation, ensuring they receive the appropriate support. While in this case, it may not have influenced decision-making regarding the prosecution of Ryan, it should be properly noted and recorded. The introduction of the Warwickshire-based NRM Panel should assist this in the future.

The volume of presenting problems displayed by Ryan and Emily meant that practitioners were so busy dealing with day-to-day crises and other issues the opportunity to reflect on the root of this behaviour and consider a different strategy was all but lost.
The information submitted by the Youth Justice Service makes several references to the impact of early life trauma particularly for Ryan. While the relevance of this is clearly understood, the implications of this are not reflected in the practice of other agencies.
The key issue and major challenge for services attempting to work with Emily and Ryan either separately or together was their implacable resistance to working with any service voluntarily.
LEARNING POINT: ***Trauma-informed practice locates adolescent behavioural and mental health problems in early life experiences. All assessments need to include this crucial history.***
LEARNING POINT: ***The insights and analysis provided by trauma-informed practice would help develop a shared understanding across agencies where a succession of referrals are made but declined. It may also help to unstick systems and reframe a young person's behaviour, so their rejection of help is seen as a symptom of their mental state rather than an outright rejection of help.***

What do I need to do....

Advice for professionals

- Read the 7 Minute Briefings: Modern Slavery & Human Trafficking (children), The Importance of History in Assessments, Use of Alcohol in Children and Young People, Contextual Safeguarding.
- Read the following policies and procedures: Harmful Sexual Behaviour and Children Affected by Harm Outside of the Home (including Exploitation, Modern Slavery, Trafficking & Gangs).

Advice for communities

Safeguarding is everyone's responsibility. If you are worried a child is at risk of abuse or neglect, contact Warwickshire's Family Connect (Children's Social Care).