



On the line

Imagine you had worked for a local authority for nearly 25 years in child protection and with looked after children. You had an exemplary attendance record and excellent supervision and appraisal reports, and you had just celebrated a big birthday with family and work colleagues.

On top of that, you had just gained promotion to a service manager position – in an acting-up capacity at least – news that had been greeted by a rapturous round of applause when announced to managers, social workers and district office staff. As one social worker remarked, things were “going well” for me.

The day had started like any other. As usual, I got up and took my children to school. When I arrived at work there was a letter on my desk from a group of anonymous social workers in my team, recognising that I had only been in post for four weeks but highlighting to me their concerns about high caseloads, social work capacity and practice issues. They also informed me that many social workers were on the verge of going off with ‘work related’ stress.

At this stage the district was already two social workers down due to difficulties recruiting agency staff. Despite this, I was due, that very day, to release a social worker for six months to ‘user test’ a new computer system which had so far failed to meet the needs of the service. I had raised my concerns about

A social worker suspended following management allegations about his practice, describes the period of intense uncertainty that ensued. Despite his life being turned upside down, information about his alleged malpractice was scarce and the support on offer from his employer negligible, much to his palpable frustration.

the wisdom of this decision at this time, and its impact on safeguarding, but to no avail.

At lunchtime the district manager requested to see me. Ominously, the manager advised that she needed to see me later that day and that if I was in a union then an official should be present. She refused to give any further details, although I recognised from her tone and my experience that a suspension looked likely.

Anxiety

All afternoon I was in a state of high anxiety, wondering what bombshell was going to be dropped on me. I chose not to phone my wife because she was not well herself, with anxiety issues of her own. Later I went into the district manager’s office, accompanied by a union official and a senior manager from HR. The allegations centred on a ‘failure to follow adequate case management procedures in relation to an individual child and as a result failing to safeguard an individual child’.

These were allegations that instantly attempted to divorce me from the organisation, the District Management (DM)

Team and social work staff; allegations that go to the core of the social work profession – ‘failing to safeguard an individual child’. I asked which child and the DM gave me the details. It was a case in which there had been a Serious Case Review following the young person’s death in tragic circumstances.

At this meeting I was given a letter outlining the details of my suspension, together with a copy of the disciplinary procedure, and was told not to enter council buildings. I was told the suspension was not a judgement, but a precaution to protect me as an individual, and to protect the department. It certainly didn’t feel like that and what followed only underlined my initial feelings.

When I arrived home my wife knew something was wrong. Initially she thought I had been physically attacked, which to me just seemed to underline the nature of the job. I explained why I had been suspended and some basic facts about the case.

There was no doubt about it, I was in a state of shock. I couldn’t even bring myself to read the letter or disciplinary procedure. Over the weekend I was in an agitated state,

although ironically one of my children commented that I seemed more “chilled out” than usual – make of that what you will!

Monday came and I decided to get ready for work as normal and keep up a pretence, for the sake of the children. I then read my suspension letter and the disciplinary policy and procedure more fully.

Next, I faced the big problem of what to do with myself and the 50 hours a week I now had to fill. I recognised quite quickly that I was going through a process similar to a bereavement, with the loss of something valued, manifested by a process of shock, protest, disorganisation and reorganisation. The ‘psychological contract’ I had with the local authority had been broken.

I decided I needed to put strategies in place to help me cope. I had never taken medication in my life, apart from for coughs and colds, and I wasn’t going to start now. Gaining a grip on what had happened to me was crucial to how I coped, so I set about remembering my management of the case in question and spoke with others who might be able to help.

Fortunately, my close family offered an immediate place to turn. I confided in my younger sister, who is a senior occupational health manager at a large local hospital, and she tried to reassure me it was probably “just procedure” while the facts were established. I also told my older sister, a practising social worker of 40 years’ experience and a former NSPCC inspector with a Masters in ‘ethics in social work’. She was scathing of the decision.

She questioned who would undertake child protection work in the future with the fast developing culture of blame, a hysterical media and the negative attention associated with cases such as Baby Peter in Haringey.

She also raised the question of my employer’s duty of care towards me. It seemed non-existent. Currently working in mental health, she went on to empathise with my situation and that of others in a similar situation to mine but who lack the support of

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family and friends that I had – the potential impact of the isolation and despair doesn’t bear thinking about.

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So, for the next few weeks I continued to put strategies in place to cope. Most nights were characterised by fitful sleeping and waking early with details of the case constantly swirling around inside my head. It was hard to focus and I remained agitated and anxious but also determined to answer the allegations. My wife continued to support and reassure me, while my older sister told me to “look ahead”, insisting that “things will turn around”.

Interview

An investigatory interview followed but clarity for me remained elusive. I had no access to information and the case in question had been closed for ten months. There was a complete lack of clarity around the reasons why I had been suspended, together with an absence of any timeframe for how things would proceed, and poor communication about how the case was developing.

Around the time of my investigatory interviews, David Scott, the chief of London Probation, had resigned due to his service being unable to prevent the brutal murder of two French students. Reading an article he wrote in the *Guardian* newspaper [10 June 2009], it was all too easy to recognise some of the difficulties he had experienced in post, such as the challenge of retaining experienced staff, the pressures of workload, poor accommodation, and information systems that fail to support the work.

Equally, I recognised, and in no sense underestimate, David Scott’s assessment, ‘that each of the cases that goes wrong is a personal tragedy, causing irreparable pain, damage and loss’.

I decided to be more proactive and contacted the British Association of Social Workers for its advice. Although BASW was unable to represent me in the case, as I wasn’t a member at that time, it did provide me with

invaluable advice that held me in good stead. BASW felt I needed to be more assertive with the investigating officer and not to rely on the union official but trust in my own professional judgement. Furthermore, following this discussion, I self-referred to occupational health and was referred for counselling.

A further investigatory interview followed, in which I challenged the investigating officer and asked her what adequate management procedures I had not followed. She became defensive. I made it clear that if this investigation went any further it would be vigorously defended.

Following this meeting I remained anxious but felt more empowered. I was very clear about my actions as a manager in this case and very clear that I had acted in the best interests of the child. As I put it to the investigating officer, I was acting upon strategic priorities – which were not set by me but by the strategic management team of which the investigating officer was a part.

Two weeks after the second investigatory interview I received a letter from the assistant director, asking me to telephone him, a call he suggested I would find ‘reassuring’. On calling the assistant director I was informed that the outcome of the disciplinary investigation was that no further disciplinary action would be taken but that there were “concerns” about some aspects of my management. However, the assistant director added, the management wanted to be “constructive” and I was to return to work in my substantive post.

I later received a letter lifting the suspension. The letter stated: ‘From the investigation process I am confident you have a conscientious approach and are a hardworking manager. This management instruction is being delivered without any stigma...’

I am now returning to work on a phased return. I have the task of motivating and leading my team and to deliver on performance.

The writer is a team manager working in a frontline child protection team on a neighbourhood basis