

This Serious Case Review is about Lauren now aged 18. When she was 17, she came into foster care through an Emergency Protection Order (EPO). The trigger event for the EPO was Lauren (aged 17) being sexually exploited and harassed on-line by an adult male who had asked her to meet him where he would give her money and alcohol to engage in sexual activity

## SCR Details

Lauren was a child of 14, with a learning disability which often went unrecognised; she was severely sexually abused, exploited and assaulted over a three-year period. It is important to recognise that the considerable sexual, physical and emotional harm that Lauren experienced was caused by a large number of predatory males and it is important that this is both recognised and acknowledged; something that was not consistently the case for Lauren at the time.

Lauren could also reasonably have expected to be cared for, nurtured and protected by her parents and wider family. There is considerable evidence that this was not the case by her parents; there is little information available about the wider family and their relationships with Lauren. She experienced early neglect from both her parents with long term impact on her emotional and physical well-being. There is also clear evidence of the ongoing neglect of her adolescent needs, particularly for safety, love and advice. Her father did not keep her safe from sexual abuse and did not comply with advice from agencies which might have helped.

When Lauren was aged 3 and Jem aged 5 the nursery/school they attended had worries about Jem's knowledge of sexual matters which they assessed as inappropriate for her age. They made a referral to GCSC and assessments and support were provided.

There had been a long history of Lauren being sexually abused, raped and exploited by predatory men. Lauren had expressed a wish to die on social media and there were concerns about her father being able to protect her.

Sexual abuse involves forcing or enticing a child or young person to take part in sexual activities, not necessarily involving a high level of violence, whether or not the child is aware of what is happening

An Emergency Protection Order was sought and granted; Lauren was placed in foster care. A children's guardian was allocated for the follow up hearing to extend the EPO; she reviewed the chronology provided by Gloucestershire Children's Social Care (GCSC) about their involvement with Lauren and her family dating back to February 2016, when Lauren was 14. This contained information about 149 significant events, including allegations of sexual assault, sexual exploitation and rape.

The language used in the records by many professionals during this time was that Lauren was making active choices, putting herself at risk, actively sexualised and at times seeking out the abusers. This language does not accurately reflect the level of exploitation and grooming that she experienced by predatory males.

### Useful links:

1. [GSCE Website](#)
2. [GSCE Escalation Policy](#)
3. [GSCE Neglect Resources](#)
4. [GSCE CSE Resources](#)

# Practice Briefing

0219 Lauren SCR

Lauren had been provided with services under a child in need plan for a year and was subject to child protection plans under the category of neglect for 2 years. During this time, she was assessed as having significant learning disabilities, poor health, emotional distress and a Mental Capacity Assessment in early 2018 had found that she did not have the capacity to consent to sexual activity.

It is important to say that the level of the sexual abuse and exploitation was serious, causing significant harm, was exacerbated by her known medical needs, and was frequent

From January 2018 onwards there were a number of Legal Planning meetings to consider whether the threshold for issuing legal proceedings had been met; these were beset by delay, drift and incident led practice. At the beginning of 2019 there were escalating concerns about the extent of the sexual abuse and sexual exploitation that Lauren experienced and growing evidence that her father and sister had facilitated her meeting inappropriate adults.

If the neglect of children and young people are to be addressed, there needs to be a clear analyse of why it is occurring; what is causing it.

Lauren was nearly 18 when the EPO was taken, and so proceedings continued under the auspices of the court of protection. She remains protected and living away from home.

There were considerable concerns that the vast majority of professionals working with Lauren struggled to avoid victim blaming language which implied choice and control. Some professionals went further and actively implied “promiscuity”. All seemed to lose sight that she was a child with a learning disability who was being exploited.

Lauren has had contact with many different specialist services throughout her childhood due to issues of neglect caused by her parents own difficulties. The poor physical and emotional care provided to Lauren resulted in global developmental delay and specific concerns about her impaired gross motor skills. Lauren was slow to walk, with professionals attributing this to being strapped into a pushchair for long periods of time. This also led to lifelong mobility issues which required regular hospital attendance. These early developmental impairments would remain as areas of health and education concerns which impacted on her throughout her childhood

Adolescent neglect is defined as “persistent and pervasive failure by a parent or parent figure to meet an adolescents physical, emotional, educational, medical and safety needs; causing harm to their health and development and increasing their vulnerability to all forms of exploitation, increasing possible engagement with risky behaviours such as substance misuse, sexually harmful behaviours, anti-social behaviour, crime and increasing the likelihood of poor mental health and wellbeing. It may be deliberate or not”

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## SCR Findings

Recommendation 1: The Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Executive (GSCE) needs to ensure that action is taken to address:

- Where early help plans are deemed an appropriate response to the early signs of sexual exploitation. That the sexual exploitation itself is addressed directly and not just focussed on addressing family difficulties or programmes designed to educate young people.
- Ensure that there is a process in place whereby all children who are subject to a CiN plan or CP plan because of sexual exploitation have a disruption plan in place which would be incorporated into these wider plans.
- In cases of sexual exploitation nationally there are well documented concerns about the engagement of vulnerable, traumatised and abused young people in action to address their abuse. The causes for this are well known and should not be automatically focussed on a failure in the young person. Professionals need to be supporting young people, addressing their fears and reluctance, alongside recognising their capacity. This should be a routine part of the early help/child in need/child protection planning and discussion process.

- There were considerable concerns that the vast majority of professionals working with Lauren struggled to avoid victim blaming language which implied choice and control

Lauren experienced early neglect from both her parents with long term impact on her emotional and physical well-being. There is also clear evidence of the ongoing neglect of her adolescent needs, particularly for safety, love and advice. Her father did not keep her safe from sexual abuse and did not comply with advice from agencies.

**Recommendation 2:** The GSCE should ask core agencies involved with Lauren to undertake an Equalities Impact screening of their current service offer to assess the extent to which it effectively addresses the needs of learning-disabled children and young people not known to specialist services.

**Recommendation 3:** The GSCE may wish to develop guidance regarding best practice in working in a child centred way with children and young people with learning disabilities who receive services from non-specialist agencies.

**Recommendation 4:** The transition planning from children to adult social care services was not effective. It is not clear if this was just an issue for Lauren or there are wider concerns about transition planning. The GSCE should seek further information to evaluate what action needs to be taken in this area.

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**Recommendation 5:** The GSCE needs to assure itself that the planned refocus on the GSCE Neglect Strategy, procedures, single agency training and multi-agency training programme results in demonstrable improved outcomes for children living in neglectful circumstances

Research has shown that there is a strong connection between child and adolescent neglect and sexual abuse and exploitation.

**Recommendation 6:** Multi-agency partners have already made a commitment to a trauma informed and restorative approach to practice, informed by the learning from ACEs. The findings from this review of Lauren's circumstances needs to inform the ongoing development of a trauma informed approach and the GSCE should satisfy themselves that this would make a difference to the service response to young people like Lauren

**Recommendation 7:** The GSCE to undertake work to promote the role of escalation in partnership working in the context of respect and mutual understanding of others' roles and responsibilities. There should be a focus on restorative practice principles that foster and enhance partnership working and a culture where respectful professional challenge is productive and welcomed as the voice of a 'critical friend'

It is inevitable that there will be professional disputes and differences of opinion given the complexity of safeguarding. What is important that these difference or disputes are addressed in a child focussed way.

**Recommendation 8:** The GSCE will need to be assured that the current improvement plan for Children's services delivers change that will make a difference to children like Lauren and that this work is being done alongside multi-agency partners as critical friends.

For Lauren there were weaknesses in the multi-agency responses to child sexual exploitation, including disruption and particularly worrying victim blaming attitudes that got in the way of ensuring she understood that she was not responsible for the severe sexual abuse and assault she experienced. Her learning disabilities were not understood and this exacerbated these problems alongside the impact of her experiences of neglect and trauma. Alongside these complex factors which interacted negatively and cumulatively over time, the basics of the child in need and child protection system were not in place.

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