

Social Work Online Team Training (SWOTT) toolkit:

LEARNING OBJECT 2:

CASE STUDY - CIARAN

Child Welfare Inequalities: Poverty

Ciaran lives in Lawcourt, Annesbury, one of the most deprived wards in Monarshire, an otherwise affluent county. He is 11 years old and started seven months ago as a student at a community college in a more affluent part of Monarshire. He was previously a student much closer to home at a primary school in Lawcourt, and had never been referred to children's social services before. Due to Ciaran frequently attending school in visibly dirty uniform, with unbrushed hair that was rarely tended to and after the development of a persistent cough, a referral was made to children's services early help team. This referral was made with full consent from Ciaran's parents, due to them sharing the school's concerns regarding his persistent cough.

Whilst waiting for the referral to be actioned by the local authority, a Work Coach at a local Job Centre reported to children's services that he had observed bruising on Ciaran's arm. Ciaran had attended the job centre appointment with his stepfather, as there was no one else to care for him at that time. Following a safeguarding conversation with his manager, it was agreed that the Work Coach would share his observations with children's services. The referral made by the job centre was picked up by the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub, who recommended a child and family assessment should take place, under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989.

In Ciaran's case files are reflections from the assessing social worker about his home conditions. The file notes that the home, a two-bedroom apartment, was untidy and that Ciaran was sharing a bedroom with his two stepsisters, aged 4 and 7. His mother and stepfather slept in a second bedroom. His mother claimed to not see the dirty uniform and unbrushed/uncut hair as a problem, as she washed the uniform once a week and couldn't afford to run the washing machine every time it got dirty, and that neither of these things seemed to bother Ciaran anyway. The social worker also reported a lack of food in the fridge.

Upon closer inspection, the social worker found the children's shared bedroom to have a growing infestation of black mould. On writing up the initial assessment, the social worker used the council's 'integrated insight system' to find that Ciaran's mother had previously been sectioned under the Mental Health Act and his stepfather had been arrested and sentenced in his early 20s for aggravated assault. These were noted as important risk factors.

At the child in need meeting, Ciaran's mother brought an advocate, a community support worker who had known both Ciaran's mother and his stepfather for more than 5 years. The advocate, Mrs. Masey, explained that Ciaran's mother had reported the mould to her private landlord when it started to develop six months ago, but no action had been taken by the landlord or the council. It turned out that the mould had been a previous problem but had been painted over after the last tenants left. She explained that the community charity she works for used to receive a grant from the council for small housing renovations, but that this had been stopped. The family was unable to move to a new property because of the cost involved. Ciaran's mother also explained that she was sectioned three years before Ciaran, her oldest child, was born, and that her husband, Ciaran's stepfather, was convicted before they became a couple. She was unable to explain the bruises on Ciaran's arm and said that they were 'probably from fighting with his sister'.

A plan was created and taken to the council's resource panel for approval. At this panel, it was proposed that Mrs. Masey's organisation be granted some funds to deal with the immediate health problem that the mould represented. The resource panel refused this request, stating that the more important issue was the child's mother and stepfather's inaction addressing the mould, and that to provide a grant in this circumstance would make them liable for every housing renovation that was raised, which would raise large financial liabilities for the authority and should be the responsibility of the housing team. The team manager argued that the most important factor here was the child's unexplained bruises and the poor parenting that led to inaction on the room's mould, especially when the children's parents were from 'high-risk populations'. The plan was changed so that Ciaran's mother and stepfather would instead be expected to attend a series of parenting and budgeting workshops, and were referred to the Citizen's Advice Bureau for support related to the housing conditions.