

7 Minute Briefing



Safeguarding Adults Review 'Alex'

Safeguarding Adults Review (SAR)

At the time of the review, Alex was a 39 year-old white British man. He has a long history of presenting with behaviours of concern, and a diagnosis of moderate learning disability, autism spectrum disorder, epilepsy, pica (compulsive consumption of non-food items), anxiety and emotionally unstable personality disorder.

Following safeguarding concerns and a referral for a safeguarding adults review, [Sunderland Safeguarding Adults Board \(SSAB\)](#) undertook a scoping exercise regarding the information known in relation to Alex. The scoping concluded that whilst this case did not meet the mandatory criteria to undertake a SAR, a [discretionary SAR](#) would be undertaken to identify learning.

Background

Alex was taken into care at a young age. Up until the period this review focuses on, it is understood that Alex had experienced around 39 failed placements. Alex was ordinarily resident in Middlesbrough and received Continuing Healthcare, which was overseen by Tees, Esk & Wear Valley (TEWV) NHS Foundation Trust.

Alex's move from a placement in County Durham to Swanton Care in Sunderland was authorised by the Court of Protection under a Section 21A challenge, which allows for legal review of deprivation of liberty arrangements. The move took place quickly and just weeks before the first Covid-19 lockdown.

Due to his lack of mental capacity to consent to his care and accommodation, Alex was under Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS). Middlesbrough Council was the supervisory body, Alex was represented by an independent paid advocate from the advocacy service commissioned by Middlesbrough Council.

Alex's needs were extremely complex and challenging, shaped by both his disabilities and past trauma. He struggled with close contact and basic care, displayed inquisitive but destructive behaviours, and sometimes physically harmed staff. Supporting him required

high emotional and physical resilience, leading to significant staff burnout and turnover in his core care team.

The Review

The review covers the period from January 2020, encompassing Alex's transition and move to Swanton Care, to December 2022 when Alex moved from Sunderland to an emergency placement. The review also considered Alex's experiences since he moved from Swanton Care and his transition to his current care home.

Alex's family are not actively involved in his life and he is supported by an independent advocate in connection with a Deprivation of Liberty authorisation. Alex's current independent advocate was actively involved with this review and participated as a panel member in order to represent his views.

From late 2021 to late 2022, Alex experienced a 'creep' in restrictions, which included:

- Continuous remote video surveillance
- Increased staffing ratios
- Isolation from community and healthcare
- Limited human contact

These restrictions were not formally authorised under DoLS, rendering them unlawful.

Alex had three different advocates during his time at Swanton Care, during this two-year period only 6 face-to-face visits were recorded. Reports were not submitted to Middlesbrough Council for over a year, prompting formal complaints and eventually a change in provider.

During the period of the review, 12 safeguarding concerns were raised. The first in July 2020, then in October 2020 with no further concerns reported again until May 2022. In late 2022 there was a significant escalation in concerns, with five reported in a two-week period.

In October 2022 Swanton Care concluded they could no longer meet Alex's needs and served 28 days' notice on the placement. On 28th November 2022, Alex was supported to transition to an interim placement whilst exploring a long-term plan.

Following his move from Swanton Care, Alex begun to receive intensive keyworker support from TEWV, which included active modelling with staff and a three-month transition plan to his current placement, which he moved to in July 2024. This approach has been incredibly positive for Alex and he has flourished in his placement and achieved a number of personal goals, such as engaging with his community. It is hoped that this intensive support has broken the cycle of re-traumatisation for Alex and that he now feels safe and supported in his environment.

Lessons to be Learnt

Transitions

Alex's admission to Swanton Care was rapid and reactive, with insufficient assessment of his complex history. Swanton Care has since implemented:

- A Needs Assessment Tool to evaluate suitability
- Compatibility assessments to consider the impact of potential new residents on existing residents
- A structured assessment pathway with defined roles and responsibilities
- TEWV's Learning Disability Team now provides ongoing, needs-based support to new placements, with no fixed end date. This model is resource-intensive and not universally available, but has proven effective in Alex's case

Trauma-Informed Practice

Alex's behaviours were often misinterpreted as aggression rather than manifestations of trauma. He has a history of abuse, neglect, and sexual trauma, and was removed from his parents - who also had learning disabilities - at a young age. A medic from Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear (CNTW) NHS Foundation Trust noted that Alex's trauma likely contributed to his difficulty forming trusting relationships and may have influenced his personality disorder.

Historically, professionals failed to apply trauma-informed approaches, often shifting responsibility without addressing the underlying causes of Alex's behaviours, which led to repeated placement breakdowns. However, his most recent care - led by TEWV's keyworker, advocate, and care team - demonstrated best practice in trauma-informed support, helping Alex build trust, independence, and community engagement. The introduction of TEWV's Intensive Support Team, offering psychological support for the person as well as support to the care provider staff, has been a successful alternative to hospital-based care for complex cases like Alex's.

Multi-Agency Working

The review identified that the large size and complexity of the multi-disciplinary team (MDT) involved in Alex's care led to confusion about roles, responsibilities, and accountability. This hindered effective communication and coordination. Since Alex's move, the MDT has been streamlined into a smaller core group, with other professionals brought in as needed. Additionally, Swanton Care have introduced an MDT log to track agreed actions and ensure timely follow-up, improving accountability and outcome monitoring.

Deprivation of Liberty

Alex was unlawfully deprived of his liberty at Swanton Care due to a reactive approach, poor understanding of Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) responsibilities, and ineffective advocacy support. In response, Swanton Care committed to involving the Supervisory Body early in any situation that might affect a person's liberty.

Since Alex's move, the recommissioned advocacy service has provided consistent and effective representation, with regular DoLS reporting. While some organisations like South Tyneside and Sunderland (STSFT) NHS Foundation Trust have strong internal DoLS advisory teams and local collaboration, cross-boundary coordination remains an area needing improvement.

Advocacy

Face-to-face visits are essential for advocates to build trust with individuals, understand their communication styles, preferences, and living conditions, and identify any new restrictions. To ensure effective advocacy, caseloads must be manageable, especially for complex or out-of-area cases, allowing advocates to prioritise quality over quantity. Regular, high-quality supervision is also critical to uphold advocacy standards, ensure timely reporting, support advocates, and maintain appropriate caseloads.

Safeguarding

Between July 2020 and late 2022, twelve safeguarding concerns were raised regarding Alex, with a notable spike in October 2022 when five concerns were reported within two weeks. The review believes these concerns should have been escalated to senior management for review. Although Sunderland Adult Social Care was not the funding authority, existing protocols allow for escalation in cases with multiple referrals if there have been three or more referrals within a 6 month period.

Working with Complex and Challenging Needs

Alex's complex and challenging needs contributed to frequent placement breakdowns, staff burnout, and reactive care approaches, which in turn retraumatised him and hindered his ability to build trust. To address this, Swanton Care have introduced enhanced supervision, incident reviews, and resilience support for staff. The North East and North Cumbria (NENC) Integrated Care Board (ICB) is also working to improve early identification of complex patients and streamline referral pathways for timely interventions.

Alex's positive progress in his current placement highlights the value of trauma-informed, person-centred care and offers a strong example of best practice for supporting individuals with similar needs.

Further Reading

The Alex SAR Executive Summary report can be read on the SSAB website [here](#).