

Case 5 | Bulletin 31 – General

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LEARNING THE LESSONS

Recognising conflicts of interest

Failure to recognise a conflict of interest about safeguarding concerns, raising issues about:

- *Recognising conflicts of interest.*
- *Role of senior officers in assessing investigator's potential conflicts of interest.*

This case is relevant if you work in:

Investigations



Public protection



Overview of incident

Eighteen-year-old Mr A made an allegation that when he was between the ages of seven and 11, his father Mr B abused him.

Police raised safeguarding concerns for Mr B's 15-year-old stepchild and 10-year-old child. Detective Sergeant (DS) C decided that a joint visit should be carried out by police and social services to tell Mr B's wife, Ms D, about the allegation. This decision was supported by Acting Detective Inspector E. The visit could not be carried out immediately because social services staff were not available.

In the meantime, a child protection strategy meeting with police and social services was arranged to discuss the case. Acting Detective Sergeant (A/DS) F, a public protection unit (PPU) officer, was assigned to attend for the police.

While preparing for the meeting, A/DS F became aware that she knew Mr B and Ms D. The officer was a close friend of one of their neighbours. She later described their relationship as that of acquaintances and that her only interaction with them was as neighbours of her friend. A/DS F also discussed her knowledge of Mr B and Ms D with a colleague, DS C. They agreed that there was no conflict of interest. There was no policy in place requiring A/DS F to ask a senior officer to assess this.

The child protection strategy meeting was held four days after the allegation was made. At the beginning of the meeting, A/DS F said that she knew the family of Mr B and this was recorded in the minutes. During the meeting, Mr A's allegation and safeguarding concerns were discussed. It was agreed that the joint visit to Mr B and Mrs D would take place later that day so that they could be informed of the allegation and safeguards could be implemented. Following the meeting, A/DS F allocated the case to an officer to follow up and had no further involvement with the case.

The joint visit was carried out by Detective Constable H and a social worker. Mr B and Ms D were advised of the allegation and a contract of expectations was signed by Mr B. This stated that he would have no unsupervised access to his 10-year-old daughter while the investigation was ongoing. The stepson was living with his father at that time.

Ms D made a complaint that A/DS F should not have been involved in the child protection strategy meeting, and the decision-making because she was a friend of the family.

Type of investigation

Appeal against local investigation.

Findings and recommendations

Local recommendations

Finding 1

1. Although there was a conflict of interest in this case, this did not affect A/Detective Sergeant F's decision-making or impartiality. The potential conflict of interest should have been recognised and escalated to a senior officer. There is currently no policy for this.

Local recommendation 1

2. The force should develop a policy for senior officers to assess whether investigators have a direct or indirect conflict of interest. It is not appropriate for investigators to make this decision. This is particularly important in sensitive PPU cases. The impact on family and close friends should be considered.

Response to the recommendations

Local recommendations

Local recommendation 1

1. This has been recommended for incorporation into force guidance and procedures under the 'professionalising investigations' policy, which is currently being reviewed and redrafted. The suggested amendment emphasises the need for integrity and transparency in investigations, and the role of the officer's senior management team in assessing whether it is appropriate for an officer to continue to be involved in that investigation.
2. Investigative issues, like conflict of interest, can be considered in daily task management briefings. These make managers and supervisors aware of issues so that they can implement changes.

Outcomes for officers and staff

1. There were no disciplinary or criminal outcomes for any of the officers or staff involved in this case.

Questions to consider

Questions for policy makers and managers

1. What guidance do you give to officers and staff on assessing possible conflicts of interest?

Questions for police officers and police staff

2. Thinking about this case, what would you do if you found yourself in the same situation?
3. Do you know what to do if you identify a possible conflict of interest? Who would you speak to for advice, or to report it?
4. If you are involved in investigations, what could possible conflicts of interest include?

For more information about this case, please email learning@ipcc.gsi.gov.uk