

**GLOUCESTERSHIRE
SAFEGUARDING
CHILDREN BOARD
(GSCB)**

Serious Case Review Sub Committee

Re: Case 0105

Executive Summary

April 2007

Introduction

- 1.1** This Serious Case Review was commissioned by the Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Board (GSCB) to focus on the care given to 5 children who were placed in the care of a single carer, Mrs Eunice Spry, and who were either privately fostered, fostered through the local authority or adopted by her, or were made subject to Residence Orders whilst in her care. The period of care spanned 20 years, from when the first child was privately fostered in 1984, through to December 2004, when two of the children had left home as young adults and allegations were made that throughout their lives with Mrs Spry, all the children had been physically and emotionally abused by her. Child protection investigations were undertaken, at which time the children/young people disclosed a significant level of serious abuse, including the sexual abuse of one child, which led to the remaining two children in Mrs Spry's care being removed and placed into Local Authority care. This review only addresses information that was held by the agencies involved with this family. Therefore it does not consider information relating to the serious allegations of abuse made to the police and which subsequently became the subject of criminal proceedings. The review confirms that agencies were not aware of the extent to which these children were being abused.
- 1.2** This Serious Case Review was therefore commissioned because of concerns that the children had been subjected to abuse, which was undiscovered for a number of years, and that during this time Mrs Spry had been formally approved as either their carer or as their adoptive parent.
- 1.3** As part of Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Board's (GSCB) commitment to learn and develop interagency child protection practice within Gloucestershire, and in accordance with "Working Together" guidance from the DfES a Serious Case Review was undertaken to establish the facts of the case, to analyse the professional interventions with these children and to identify how the different agencies in Gloucestershire can work together better to safeguard children and young people.
- 1.4** In particular the Review was established to address: -
 - How and why the children came to be cared for by Mrs Spry
 - The processes by which Mrs Spry was approved to care for these children
 - Information about the children's health and well-being whilst in the care of Mrs Spry.
 - Any contact between agencies regarding the care of these children and any action taken following this contact.

Serious Case Review Process

- 2** Serious Case Reviews are undertaken as standard practice whenever an incident of serious harm to children occurs and where there may be public interest.
- 3** Serious Case Reviews require each agency that had some direct involvement with an identified child/children and their carers to undertake an Individual Management Review that looks openly and critically at individual and organisational practice with them. Each agency is required to produce a chronology of its contact with the children and their carer. Managers conducting the Individual Management Reviews must not be directly concerned with the services provided for the children or carers, or the immediate line manager of the practitioners involved.
- 4** Members of a Serious Case Review Sub Committee bring together the information provided from the Individual Management Reviews and then consider the professional practice and inter agency working as it relates to the subjects of the review. Members of this Serious Case Review Sub-Committee in Gloucestershire are senior experienced professionals from Gloucestershire Children and Young Person's Directorate (CYPD) (covering social care and education services), the NHS, (including Community Nursing and Paediatrics), the Probation Service, Gloucestershire Constabulary and the NSPCC.

- 5 The Serious Case Review Sub-Committee must then commission an independent person, as laid down in 'Working Together' to bring together the Individual Management Reviews and produce an Overview Report.
- 6 In this particular Serious Case Review the Serious Case Review Sub-Committee commissioned an independent person with extensive experience in the field of child protection to write the overview report from which this Executive Summary has been produced.

Case Details

For the purposes of confidentiality, different names have been used in this report to represent the 5 children/young people.

Anne	Born in 1984
Belinda	Born in 1986
Carol	Born in 1985
David	Born in 1988
Edward	Born in 1992

- 3.1 The four of the five children/young people who are the subject of this review were all placed with Mrs Spry as a result of private arrangements between Mrs Spry and their natural parents (private fostering).
- 3.2 Mrs Spry privately fostered the eldest child, Anne, from 1984. The second child Belinda was placed with Mrs Spry by the local authority just over two years later. Mrs Spry subsequently adopted Anne in 1989 (5 years old) and Belinda in 1992 (6 years old). Mrs Spry had two older daughters of her own, who were young adults by the time Anne and Belinda were fostered. The eldest of these daughters remained living at home and helped her mother to care for the younger children in the household.
- 3.3 By mid 1993 the other three children, Carol, David and Edward, all siblings from another family, had been made subject of Residence Orders, granted to Mrs Spry. Prior to this time Mrs Spry had privately fostered the children by private arrangement with their parents.
- 3.4 Mrs Spry's contact with Gloucestershire Social Services began in 1979 when she applied to become a childminder. This application was initially declined because of unspecified concerns from the health authority but these concerns were subsequently lifted and approval was granted. Mrs Spry's first application to become a foster parent in 1983/4 was declined as it was felt her lifestyle was not conducive to her being a foster parent. These objections were removed and she was approved as a local authority foster carer from 1985 until 1994.
- 3.5 By the end of 1993, Mrs Spry had legal parental responsibility for all five children, through Residence Orders or Adoption Orders made by the court. The involvement of Social Services in the care of the children ceased at this point.
- 3.6 By November 1994, the five children had been removed from school by Mrs Spry and educated at home by her and her eldest daughter. Between October 1990 and 2000, concerns about the care of the children were expressed on 12 occasions. Social Services did respond to these concerns, however the concerns were not at a level that was subsequently revealed through the criminal trial and therefore these responses did not lead to continued social work involvement. Mrs Spry was described as "eccentric" and there was evidence of her being quite controlling and being difficult to engage in professional interventions. Her frequent moves of home added to the difficulties.
- 3.7 Mrs Spry brought all five children to the attention of medical professionals for a range of physical and emotional/behavioural difficulties. This continued throughout the time she cared for

them. At one time at least three of the children were prescribed Ritalin and Mrs Spry made separate claims that the four youngest children suffered with significant behavioural and developmental problems.

- 3.8** In September 2000, the family were involved in a serious road traffic accident in which Anne, then aged 16 years, and Mrs Spry's eldest daughter (aged 37 years), were killed. Belinda (aged 14 years at the time) received multiple injuries and although she used a wheelchair for a period of four years, she was able to become mobile once she left Mrs Spry's home when aged 18 years. Edward was also injured in the car accident with a broken femur.
- 3.9** In December 2004 when Belinda left home as a young adult, she made allegations that she and the other children had been consistently physically and emotionally abused by Mrs Spry, by being beaten with implements or punched, locked in their bedrooms and starved of food. Belinda also complained that Mrs Spry had forced her to remain as a wheelchair user. Carol, who was 19 years and who had also left the home by this time, was approached by police and social services and made very similar allegations. David and Edward were still in the care of Mrs Spry, and when they were interviewed, they corroborated much of what was alleged by Belinda and Carol. David also later claimed that he had been sexually abused.

Key Findings

The process by which Mrs Spry came to care for the 5 children

- 4.1** In respect of the separate adoptions of Anne and Belinda, the files indicated that there was much debate by health and social care professionals about the suitability of Mrs Spry for the role, and the fact that Belinda's adoption was deferred for a period of over 3 years, reflected this. It was apparent that the length of time that Mrs Spry had already been caring for the children (approximately 4 yrs 8 months and 5 yrs 3 months respectively), the need for them to have legal security and the potential for distress if the children were to be moved, meant that the adoptions were granted in Mrs Spry's favour.
- 4.2** There are no specific concerns recorded in respect of Anne's care at the time of her adoption in April '89, but at about the same time concerns were beginning to emerge regarding Mrs Spry's care of Belinda with evidence of Mrs Spry's "lack of emotional warmth" towards her. Referrals were made to Social Services concerning her over-punishment of Belinda, including expressions of concern from her Head Teacher about Mrs Spry's harsh approach to Belinda.
- 4.3** In December 1991 the Social Services Team Manager informed Mrs Spry that she would not be supporting Belinda's adoption because of concerns she held about Mrs Spry's care of her and instigated a six-month intensive assessment of Belinda's care. It is concerning that this assessment was not completed (Mrs Spry refused to see the social worker) and the adoption was confirmed through the Court, less than a month later, without these recent concerns being addressed. The review has not been able to establish how the court made an adoption order in these circumstances.
- 4.4** At this time another two children (Carol and David) began to be cared for by Mrs Spry within a private fostering arrangement.
- 4.5** At the same time, Mrs Spry removed Belinda from school, removing an important source of monitoring of Belinda's welfare. Mrs Spry had removed Anne from school just over a year earlier. Home education is quite legal and there is no right for local authority officers to require access to see the children.
- 4.6** Edward, the younger sibling of Carol and David, was privately fostered soon after he was born, and all three children then became subjected to successful applications for Residence Orders

by Mrs Spry in June 1993. By this time Mrs Spry was caring for 5 children from the ages of a baby to 8 ½ years.

- 4.7** Social Services did not object to earlier private fostering arrangements and did not make representations to the court in disagreement with the Residence Order applications. Information was provided to the court via reports from the Court Welfare Officer. Concerns were noted about potential long term care of the children by Mrs Spry, primarily because of her strong views and alternative approach to childcare. Balancing this, the Health Visitor submitted a report at this time that was positive about Mrs Spry's parenting abilities.
- 4.8** In summary therefore, Mrs Spry's application to be a foster parent, and then an adoptive parent, eventually went through without any strong challenges or dissent. Concerns were noted about Mrs Spry's abilities as a parent at the time, but, on balance, it was felt to be in the children's interests to remain with Mrs Spry and to have legal security of placement with her. The placements outwardly appeared to be satisfactorily meeting the children's needs. There is some suggestion that Mrs Spry's dominant personality was allowed to drive relationships with the statutory agencies.

Attitudes to child health, behaviour and developmental issues

- 5.1** At different times, Mrs Spry claimed that three of the children suffered with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or Attention Deficit Disorder and later that Carol suffered with Autistic Spectrum Disorder. She also claimed that Belinda was suffering from Asperger's Syndrome. To varying degrees the children received considerable specialist health interventions to address these problems. Health issues of this nature are not routinely shared with Social Services.
- 5.2** The review felt that the level of concern about behaviour disorders should have led to a review via a professionals' meeting to agree these children's treatment needs, the accuracy of any diagnosis, and the possible causes of the behavioural difficulties.
- 5.3** There was evidence of degrees of uncertainty in respect of the diagnoses of ADHD for all the children, and that Mrs S always spoke for the children, never let them be seen alone, and Ritalin was prescribed for excessive periods of time without the children being seen. Mrs Spry was insistent on the need for treatment and sought out private clinics, without the support of the GP, to get a diagnosis to support the need for treatment. On one occasion the GP noted an allegation (not known from whom) that Mrs Spry had been giving Belinda Valium, obtained from a neighbour.
- 5.4** This posed the question whether "Fabricated or Induced Illness" as a form of child abuse was perpetrated by Mrs Spry. It does not appear as though this was ever raised formally as a concern by any of the professionals involved with the children.
- 5.5** Following the car accident, it was noted by health professionals that in respect of the medical care given to Belinda, that even whilst in hospital, Mrs Spry "controlled the environment" and that Belinda continued to be a wheelchair user whilst in the care of Mrs Spry, despite there being no apparent physical reason for this. After leaving Mrs Spry's care, Belinda quickly regained her mobility.
- 5.6** There was a difficulty for health professionals in conducting home visits, and doorstep visits were sometimes all that could be achieved. There was no effective coordination of the range of medical interventions and the number of failed appointments.
- 5.7** In summary, no opportunity was created to review all this information in the round and consider its significance in terms of the overall care of the children. The long period of time that these concerns continued, and the inevitable change of professionals during this time, meant that it

was difficult to identify the necessary impetus for professionals to collectively review the interventions with the family. This meant that the work with these children was limited in its effect.

Family/Professional Relationships

- 6.1 Mrs Spry controlled the amount of contact that professionals could have with the five children. She removed all of the children from school to be educated at home, as permitted by law, which had the effect of preventing any day-to-day external view of their care.
- 6.2 Mrs Spry also either rejected or consistently changed planned appointments that were offered, making it difficult for all professionals coming into contact with the family to establish a clear view of the home circumstances and the care of the children.
- 6.3 Education services did nevertheless seek to maintain contact with the family on an annual basis, to monitor their education at home, and their education and situation appeared to be generally satisfactory. No child protection concerns were noted.
- 6.4 Mrs Spry was regularly described by the professionals who came into contact with her, as having “alternative views about life and parenting”. She was also seen as being “powerful”, “controlling” and generally difficult to work with. Nevertheless there were a number of occasions when professionals made very positive statements about her care of the children, for example that Mrs Spry was “very caring”, a playschool leader described her as having “exceptional parenting skills” and a Police Officer said that he admired the way she cared for her children. There was a level of professional sympathy that developed for Mrs Spry as someone who was trying her best to care for five children, all of whom were seen as having some form of health or developmental problem.
- 6.5 Mrs S clearly had the ability to present an appearance to professionals of being a very able, concerned and caring parent, and to get them to take her side.

The Children’s Health and Development

- 7.1 It appeared as though all of the children had poor or undeveloped social skills, and were generally seen as different or unusual, very much reflecting how Mrs Spry was also seen.
- 7.2 Issues of poor communication skills, either from poor physical speech, or simply from being uncommunicative, were a distinctive feature amongst the children. It is unfortunate some link was not made between the behavioural difficulties presented by the children were not linked to the environment that they were growing up in and the culture of care that they were receiving.
- 7.3 The younger two children were prescribed Ritalin for long periods of time and although its use should be reviewed every 6 months, this did not take place during the latter stages of the drug use.

The Professional Response to Referrals

- 8.1 The referrals made to Social Services during the 10 years between 1990 and 2000, included concerns about harsh treatment or excessive punishment of the children, but apart from the situation described in 4.3 above these referrals and the responses made to them did not result in continued social work involvement.
- 8.2 The responses to the referrals were, in themselves, appropriate and in keeping with practice and procedure at the time. However the referrals seem to have been seen in isolation, with no correlation of the referrals or identification of a concerning pattern of care which was emerging. Without this overview Social Services responded inconsistently and Mrs Spry’s care of the children was not always appropriately challenged. Opportunities were therefore missed to fully

assess the level of care of the children. However it has to be acknowledged that these referrals spanned a long period of time, sometimes with significant gaps between them. Only on one occasion were the children individually spoken to about the concerns being presented at the time, although it was not clear if they were seen alone. On the occasion Mrs Spry was challenged by the Social Services in December 1991 the adoption took place in any case.

- 8.3** All of the children required some form of official sanction before they could reside within the family. Formal Reviews were held in respect of Anne and Belinda when they were in approved foster placements with Mrs Spry, and social workers were allocated to each child, in order to ensure their needs were being met through this placement. Although childcare concerns were intermittently expressed, the positive attributes that were often also noted about Mrs Spry's care of the children seemed to outweigh these. However, there should have been greater scrutiny regarding the care that the children were receiving, particularly when concerns were expressed about their health and development, and the health interventions went uncoordinated. Greater opportunities should have been pursued to see the children on their own.
- 8.4** When, in December 2004 Belinda disclosed significant past abuse by Mrs Spry, there was a well-coordinated and appropriate response from the Police and Social Services. The two remaining children were removed from her care. David disclosed serious abuse also as part of the initial investigation, and 6 months later made allegations of sexual abuse.

Recommendations

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Additional

Mrs Spry's trial in February/March 2007 brought to light important information that had not been included in the serious case review. Therefore an addendum will be added to the Serious Case Review to

- Address the issues raised by this information
- Consider why it was not available to be considered as part of the main Serious Case Review.
- Make recommendations to support the sharing of such information in the future.

This information specifically relates to

- The children's dental treatment
- Optician's appointments
- Communication between the medical professionals over the diagnosis of behaviour disorders
- Injuries seen by a medical professionals and not reported
- Confirmation that there is no further information on the injury to Belinda's ear (that may have required reconstructive surgery in 2001) or injuries caused through sandpapering her skin, within medical records.
- The police returning the children home after they had been missing on more occasions than stated in the Serious Case Review.

This additional information will be presented to a meeting of the Serious Case Review Subcommittee in May 2007.

Jo Grills
Chair Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Board
April 2007



Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Board Serious Case Review 0105: Spry Time Line: Care Arrangements

Year	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996
Child A	Aug		Apr			Apr							
Age	0yr 3m		1yr 11m			4y 11m							
Arrangement	Privately Fostered		Approved Foster Placement			Adopted							
Child B			Dec						Feb				
Age			0yr 11m						6yr 1m				
Arrangement			Approved Foster Placement						Adopted				
Child C			Feb					Dec		Jun			May
Age			0yr 9m					6yr 7m		8yr 1m			11yr 0m
Arrangement			AFP for 2m in Feb 86, returned home Apr 86					Private Foster		Residence Order			
Child D								Dec		Jun			May
Age								3yr 0m		4yr 6m			7yr 5m
Arrangement								Private Foster		Residence Order			
Child E									Sep	Jun			
Age									A few days	0yr 9m			
Arrangement									PF	Residence Order (Interim since Nov 92)			

By September 1992, Mrs S had care for 5 children. ↑

Figure 1



Gloucestershire Safeguarding Children Board Serious Case Review 0105: Spry Chronology

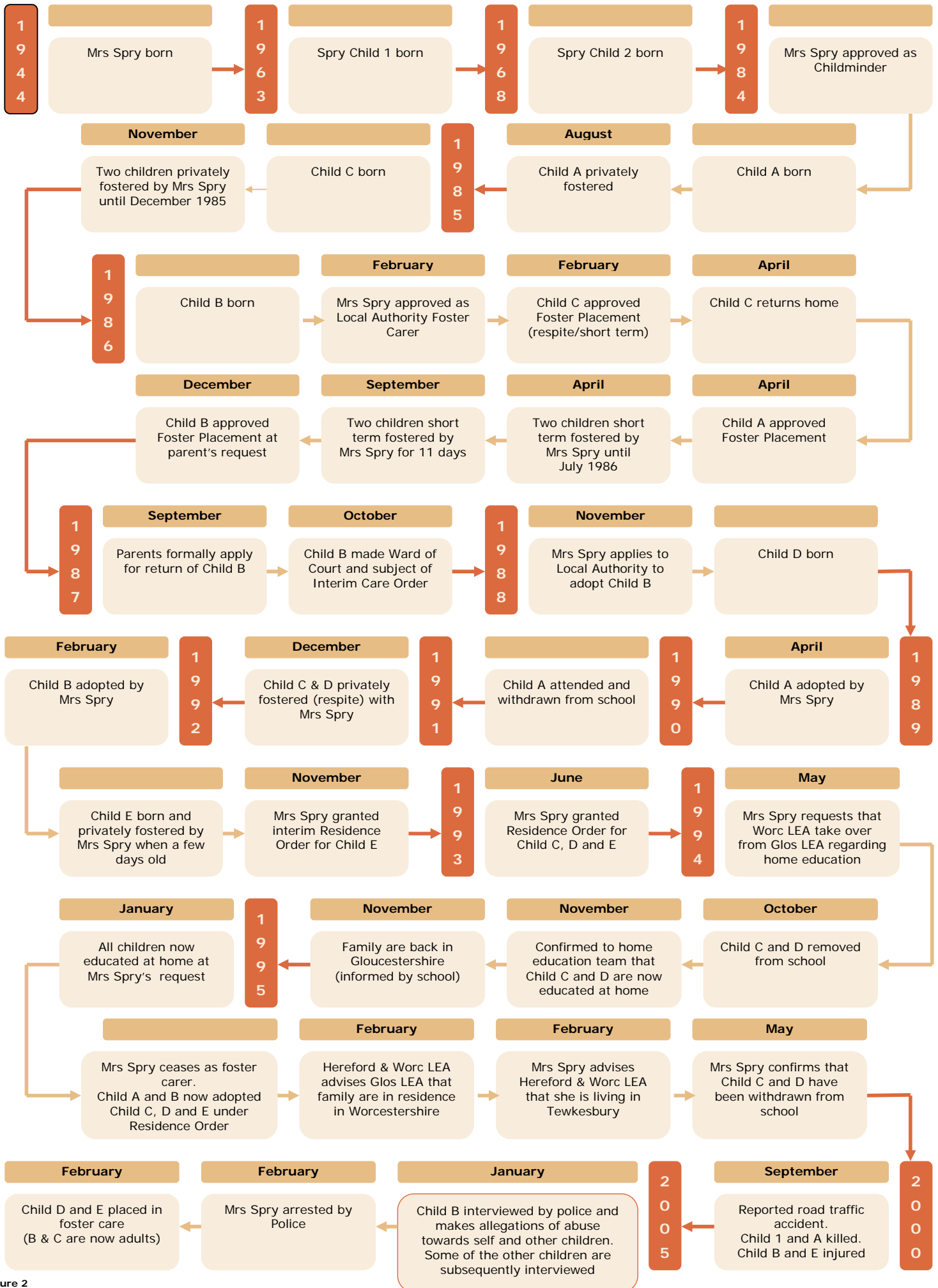


Figure 2