

# Safer sleep – new smarter practice published

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A partnership approach to preventing sudden, unexpected deaths of infants

News 3 mins read

We've published new smarter practice on [Safer Sleep](#), a joint initiative with Merseyside Police and NHS Mersey Care. The initiative educates and raises awareness among the public to promote safe sleeping practices and prevent sudden, unexpected deaths of infants (SUDIs).

The sudden, unexpected death of an infant is a tragic and traumatic experience for any family. It also has an impact on the officers and staff who respond and investigate. Between 2019 and 2022, the overall number of SUDIs doubled in Merseyside alone.

## Joint agency response

Merseyside Police and partners recognised that families in crisis were often unknowingly putting their infants at risk with unsafe sleeping practices and a joint agency response was needed. Working with NHS Mersey Care, Merseyside Police designed the Safer Sleep initiative to promote safe sleeping practices, and prevent and reduce numbers of SUDIs.

The initiative has allowed Merseyside Police to support families more effectively and improve its safeguarding service through the development of an app. The app that allows police to notify NHS Mersey Care if they attend a home and identify unsafe sleeping practices.

### Video Transcript

Sudden infant death is catastrophic for everybody – for the family, of course, but actually for the wider community, for the grandparents, for the friends, for the professionals involved. So this is something that everybody can deal with, so the information is given to new parents when they have a baby, but they're given a lot of information at the time. And it's a reinforcing that message. And if there's a way that other agencies can assist with that, that's all better.

Safer sleep came from an initial request to look at providing some enhanced awareness around domestic abuse intensification week. In particular, so we could identify potential risks that are there

for new parents, for new babies, and try and mitigate them with officers by saying, “If you can recognise these risks, then you can communicate them to the communities and hopefully reduce the risk of infant death .”

Initially, it was an A4 piece of paper, which was supposed to be printed out, taken to every incident, filled in, scanned on and returned to the NHS. We then started sort of exploring, “Well, how can we make this more efficient?” So we did a whole lot of steps and a whole load of work and developed an automated system, so when the officer clicks ‘submit’, that notification gets sent to the NHS, direct to one of their safeguarding teams.

I’m a doctor and I really want the police to do their job to tackle crime and keep the population safe. But I also want them to just think a little bit if they’re in a building or a house , for whatever reason, and they see something that’s possibly not safe sleep practice, that they would think, “Okay, I can refer this into the NHS and that’s a supportive gift that I can give to that family, and the NHS can take it and run with it and give the family the support that they may need to mitigate the risks from that unsafe sleep practice.”

What I really, really want to drive with officers is professional curiosity, and the responsibility to take action and do something about vulnerability that they are seeing within addresses . We have a prevention strand within Merseyside, and one of the pillars of that strand – and of the prevention strategy – is to prevent harm. And there is no greater need than to prevent the loss of a child.

We know we’re given information universally when people are normally quite settled, they’ve got that support from family members. But we know families also could hit crisis point, and that’s when Merseyside Police tend to be in those properties , so they’re getting a truer reflection of those current situations. And at that point, that notification has then allowed our staff and our health visiting team to contact the family and offer additional advice and support.

We don’t want officers to go in and be medical professionals. We want them to think, “I’m not quite sure that that’s right. And, you know, I’m concerned that the baby is in a difficult or a dangerous situation. Perhaps the family needs some support and advice.” So we’re not there to be punitive and tell them, “We’re going to report you further on through the police process or through social services.” This is for support through the NHS.

We need to be mindful that unsafe sleep practices aren't necessarily just going to occur amongst the communities that are criminally active . It's quite feasible that we could go to a house of somebody who is a victim of crime and we notice an unsafe sleep practice. What we've really got to be mindful of with officers is that they are switched on to those unsafe sleep practices, irrespective of the property that they may be in.

Previous to this, we'd have to do a vulnerable person referral form, which could take anywhere from half an hour to potentially a couple of hours . The whole point of this and the whole implementation is that it can take 90 seconds. And also, on the other end, it's not having to go through a panel to assess it, to decide whether it hits a threshold for referral. Actually, it goes straight to the people who can make true impact straight away.

This is a real golden opportunity for us to provide support for the people that matter – the parents and the children – but also remove our officers from what could be a really life-changing situation that they deal with. We want them to be happy and healthy at work and not have to deal with such traumatic incidents.

This is multi-agency work and action. I've been in safeguarding for about ten years now, and it has often been something theoretical. And this has just been real action. This is really changing professional behaviour and having an impact on the families and the population who are on the receiving end of our care.

A child death is a traumatic experience. It's tragic. No one should have to experience it. If we can reduce just that number by one, then we're all doing something right. That better collaborative working with other agencies is how we can do that.

It's such an important topic and such a simple solution to it, and it's not being done anywhere else. And we know that it could have a massive impact if we look to push it wider. It's a massive amount of pride to sort of be involved in something that's been so well received and could have such a positive impact. Of course, it's difficult to measure, but doing the right thing is never the wrong thing.

If you've ever dealt with a sudden infant death, and I have, I dare say it's the most horrendous thing you've ever had to deal with and probably ever will. So the reality is, if I can make a contribution – even if it's a small contribution – to reducing sudden infant deaths in the future, it's an absolute

valuable use of my time, and also everyone else's internally and externally too.

## New process

Before introducing the app, officers and staff would have to complete a vulnerable person referral form. This could take anywhere from half an hour to a couple of hours to complete. It was then passed to a panel for referral. Now the whole process takes around 90 seconds and the information goes directly to the safeguarding team for immediate action.

Safer Sleep is now embedded in Merseyside's training for new officers which includes raising awareness of unsafe sleep practices, identifying risk and how to use the new app. Over 1,700 officers and staff have completed the online training so far.

*We don't want officers to go in and be medical professionals. We want them to think, 'I'm not quite sure that that's right and I'm concerned that the baby is in a difficult or dangerous situation, perhaps the family needs some support and advice.' We're not there to be punitive and tell them we're going to report you further on through the police process or through social services. This is for support through the NHS."*

**T/Inspector Mark Russell, Merseyside Police**

Liverpool John Moores University will help measure the impact of the initiative and highlight any case studies that show the positive impact of the new process for the public, the NHS and policing.

[Go to Safer Sleep smarter practice](#)

## Tags

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