

Rough Guide to Child Protection Conferences and Core Groups



Introduction

The *Rough Guide to Child Protection Conferences and Core Groups* is one of a series of practice guides produced by Hartlepool and Stockton-On-Tees Safeguarding Children Partnership (HSSCP) which have been designed to be read and used by the range of practitioners and professionals working across children's services in the borough.

All of the *Rough Guides* have been developed to support the valuable work that is carried out with children and young people¹ and families by identifying the key elements which underpin good practice and incorporating significant messages from research.

It should be noted that *Rough Guide to Child Protection Conferences and Core Groups* does not replace, provide the detail of or interpret legislation, policy, frameworks and procedures, which are all subject to change, but focuses more on the 'how to', offering advice, suggesting ideas and providing signposts to sources of information and further reading.

The information presented is designed to be applicable to initial and review child protection conferences and core groups but may have wider relevance.

Child protection conferences

Child protection conferences are integral to the child protection system in this country. They are formal, often large, interagency meetings with the purpose of:

- Bringing together and analysing information about the child and family
- Arriving at a judgement about the likelihood that the child has been abused or harmed or might suffer abuse or harm in the future
- Jointly deciding what needs to happen and developing a plan for change, which may be a child protection plan or a child in need plan, and which responds to the child's assessed needs and specific circumstances. In the case of review conferences, progress of the plan and achievement of desired outcomes is evaluated.

¹ To avoid repetition in subsequent sections, child or children are the terms used to refer to children and young people.

This will involve rigorous exploration of danger/harm alongside indications of family strengths and safety to provide answers to the following questions:

- What are we worried about specifically with regard to this child? (ANALYSIS)
- What is working well for this child and in this family? (ANALYSIS)
- What are the results we want for this child? What is the desired future? (OUTCOME STATEMENTS)
- What do we need to see to know that the outcome is being or has been achieved and stops us being worried? What will show us that the child is safe? (OUTCOME INDICATORS)
- What needs to happen to achieve the results or outcomes and who will do what? (ACTION PLANNING)

By the end of the conference, all participants should understand what the specific concerns are, what the desired results for the child are, what needs to happen (which should be communicated in positive rather than negative terms such as someone stopping doing something) to achieve those results and what the priorities are. The plan should be individualised, going beyond pre-set, traditional service packages (e.g. parenting classes) to respond to the child's assessed needs and specific circumstances and build on existing supports and family strengths.

Remember.....



Child protection conferences should never be seen as opportunities to dump concerns on the table, breathe a sigh of relief and walk away. They are about analysis and planning and are the starting point for change in children's and families' lives which requires collaborative effort (including from you) to achieve.

Parents' and children's participation in child protection conferences

Child protection conferences are not just meetings for professionals and practitioners and a key aim is to engage and involve parents in the process of planning to achieve the safety and wellbeing of their children. Working collaboratively and in partnership with parents is a longstanding concept in the work of children's services, not least because involving parents in decision making and planning is a more ethical way of working which can help to get 'buy in' and cooperation from the people who will be impacted most by the decisions and plans made. (See *Rough Guide to Participation*.)

In most cases, parents will be invited to attend and participate in the child protection conference. Clearly, there is a very real power differential between parents and practitioners in child protection work and it would be wrong to pretend that parents are equal partners in the decision making that takes place in the conference setting. But they can make a valuable contribution to the planning process (and are more likely to cooperate and commit to implementing the plan as a result).

Practitioners and parents alike can find conferences challenging. As largely involuntary participants in the child protection process, many parents find them intimidating and most find them stressful, with feelings of being overwhelmingly outnumbered by professionals.

(Research has shown that the experience of attending child protection conferences, especially initial conferences, was one of the most vividly remembered aspects of involvement with child protection services.) Additionally, parents and professionals are unlikely to share the same views about the concerns but focusing on the results or outcomes to be achieved for their children can enable parents to actively participate in protection planning and contribute ideas about the best way forward.

Children's attendance at child protection conferences is less common and undoubtedly raises more issues and creates more debate than that of parents. Preparation before the conference, support during the conference and feedback after the conference are all crucial when the decision is made to extend an invitation to a child and this will require careful planning by the practitioners involved.

There are likely to be children who don't attend a conference but wish they had and we know that there are children who have attended conferences who, for a variety of reasons, wished they hadn't. But it's important to remember attendance and participation are not the same and children's views and opinions can be presented to the conference in different ways. Practitioners' reports to conference are a powerful medium and a participative approach to report writing can ensure the voices of children (and parents) are heard and taken account of by everyone.

For further guidance on children's participation, you are strongly recommended to read *Rough Guide to Participation*.

Expectations of practitioners and professionals at child protection conferences

- To accord attendance at child protection conferences, both initial and review conferences, high priority
- To have robustly prepared for the conference
- To have contributed to preparing parents (and, where appropriate, children) to participate in the conference
- To find, select, analyse and present accurate and relevant information
- To actively contribute and recognise that staying silent is not an option
- Careful listening and effective communication
- To have a clear focus on the analysis of harm and risk alongside exploration of family strengths and safety factors
- To be prepared to be part of the solution for the child and family
- To engage in the development of the plan for the child
- To engage in the implementation of the plan for the child
- To complete all agreed actions after the conference

Remember.....



It's called *Working Together to Safeguard Children* for a reason.

Before the conference

Robust preparation in advance of the conference is crucial for effective participation by practitioners:

Remind yourself what the purpose of the conference is, what it aims to achieve and what your role is in it.

Plan and write your report (See *Rough Guide to Assessment and Rough Guide to Recording and Report Writing*), ensuring that the content is accurate, relevant, succinct and makes sense.

Share your report with the family so that they understand what you think and why. To participate effectively in the conference, parents (and, if appropriate, children) need to be informed and they need time to read, talk through and reflect what practitioners are saying about them, their children and their parenting.

Contribute to preparing parents and, if appropriate, children for participation in the conference. Parents need information, often more than once or in more than one format, about the child protection system generally and the conference process specifically. They may need support to actually get to the conference venue. They may have questions about what happens in a conference. They may need support in compiling their views, feelings and comments in a written or alternative format for presentation at the conference. Don't just assume that someone else will do this. Acknowledge feelings of anxiety. Answer any questions honestly and accurately. Do what you can to ensure parents are prepared.

Gather relevant, up to date information. If your agency is not currently involved with the child and family, make this clear in your report and that the information you have presented has been obtained from agency records. If you have had no direct contact with the child and family, say so. In the case of a review conference, your report (or the combined report from the core group) should include your assessment of the progress of implementation of the protection plan and achievement of the desired outcomes. (See *Rough Guide to Planning and Review*.)

Ensure that any actions previously agreed, particularly if you are attending a review conference, have been followed through. Ask yourself, have you completed everything you were supposed to do and in the timescales?

Remember, delaying any actions will have an impact on the child and the family.

"I got given a load of typed notes just before the meeting, and told to read them. I didn't like to say I couldn't read, not that much all at once anyway." *Quote from a parent after attending a conference*

"(Agency) did a report that was horrible. I had no idea what they were going to say. They never told me." *Quote from a parent after attending a conference*

Ensure that you have a clear understanding of the parents' and child's views and have included these in your report, even if they are different to your views. Use the child's and parents' words. Don't interpret.

If you are representing a colleague at the conference make sure you understand their opinions and views and the rationale in order to present them accurately.

Read the reports from other practitioners and agencies. These may not be sent to you but they will be available for you to access in advance of the conference. Information sharing is an important part of the process but reading the raft of reports in a conference takes up a considerable amount of time which then impacts on the analysis and planning phases of the conference.

In the conference

Arrive on time. Remember, being late is disruptive and disrespectful to the other participants. If you haven't already read other practitioners' and agency reports, then arrive early enough to be able to do this prior to the conference starting. The purpose of reports is to share information and this can be done in advance of the conference.

Be courteous and attentive throughout the conference. Never interrupt anyone, even if you disagree strongly with what they're saying. Stay focused on the discussion. Don't drift off, thinking about what you are going to say next, what you need to do later in the day, what you'll cook for dinner or anything else. Never text, tweet or e-mail. Make sure your mobile phone is in silent mode or switched off.

Be aware of your body language such as arm crossing, eye rolling, looking out of the window and yawning which can all convey negative messages. Also avoid engaging in 'side bar' conversations with the person sitting next to you, which is very distracting for the Chair and everyone else and highly disrespectful.

Be considerate and respectful of other participants' contributions and opinions, especially those of the parents. Each individual's perspective and views might be different but all are valid. Partnership with parents is underpinned with the principle of respect which doesn't mean practitioners readily accepting explanations about alleged abuse or harm but is about adopting an attitude which enables a clear focus on harm whilst approaching families as potential partners in deciding the way forward and achieving improved outcomes for the child.

Present relevant and accurate information and opinions clearly and concisely, providing evidence to support your views wherever possible. Use straightforward language and avoid professional jargon. Don't just present a list of concerns. Don't describe family difficulties in detail. Don't say something just for the sake of saying something. Avoid duplicating what's already been said.

Challenge others' views when it is appropriate to do so. Again, don't interrupt. Make a note of what's been said and return to it later with the Chair's permission. Effective decision making benefits from robust debate of differing perspectives and views but sometimes emotions can run high in child protection conferences and challenge can turn personal. Remember to challenge what is being said rather than who is saying it and support your views and opinion with evidence.

Avoid falling into the trap of what is commonly referred to as "groupthink", one of the pitfalls of group decision making where a false consensus is reached with everyone just agreeing. Some research has highlighted a high level of conformity and agreement in child protection conferences and this can have implications for the quality and robustness of the plans developed. The aim of bringing a range of practitioners and professionals together with parents isn't just about information sharing. Conference decision making should be based on debate, critical thinking and thoughtful analysis. If you have different views to everyone else, say so, give your reasons and ensure they are recorded.

Don't just focus on the problems in the family or concerns or negatives. All families have strengths and 'ordinary competencies'. Identifying what is working well or what is 'good enough' in the family does not mean you are condoning abuse or harm in any way but it does help to plan the way forward. Most children who become involved in the child protection system remain with their families and just focusing on everything that is wrong makes it difficult to develop partnerships and implement plans to ensure safety. It's very difficult to build on a negative.

After the conference and core groups

Neither the conference itself nor the plan developed in the conference are the outcomes. It is only through implementation of plans that change happens and children's outcomes improve. When the outline plan developed by the child protection conference is a child in need plan rather than a protection plan (because the circumstances that are causing concern for the safety, welfare or wellbeing of the child or young person are not present to a significant extent), a commitment to implementation, rigorous monitoring and robust review are still crucial. As a practitioner involved with the child and family, you need to be very clear what the plan is aiming to achieve, which actions you are responsible for, the timescales for completion, and the monitoring and review arrangements. You should never assume that, because the plan is not a protection plan, there is no longer a requirement for partnership and collaborative working.

Core groups

As with child protection conferences, core groups are an essential part of the multi-agency protection planning process and are based on inter agency co-ordination, inter-professional communication and, significantly, partnership with parents and children.

It is crucial that all practitioners invited to be part of the core group maintain a total commitment to this part of the child protection process, recognising that the continued sharing and analysis of information, working in partnership with families and joint ownership of the protection plan is paramount to achieving improved outcomes for children.

Essentially, the core group is responsible for developing the outline protection plan from the initial conference (and in doing so really focusing on the detail), agreeing the actions and tasks which will need to be completed to achieve the results aimed for, specifying timescales and assigning responsibility. It is responsible for bringing the plan to life, implementing it and monitoring progress. The production of an outline child protection plan at the initial conference is not the outcome. Plans change nothing unless they are implemented and rigorously monitored. There is no other agenda item for core group meetings than the plan.

You are strongly recommended to read *Rough Guide to Planning and Review* for more detail about developing, implementing and monitoring plans.

Why are core groups so important?

The core group has been called 'the engine room' of the child protection system (Calder, 1995) and the 'catalyst for change' (Morrison, 1995). Operating more informally than child protection conferences and, being smaller and less intimidating, core groups are likely to increase the contribution and participation of everyone involved, significantly that of the child and parents. They offer a framework within which the detail of the protection plan can be negotiated, agreed and successfully implemented by:

- Providing the opportunity to strengthen relationships between involved practitioners and parents and children by overcoming the anxiety, mistrust and hostility parents often display in the earlier parts of the child protection process
- Having the potential to empower families by focusing on the detail of the solutions rather than the problems and offering parents choices wherever possible whilst still retaining the authority
- Taking account of the family's strengths and resources and enabling parents and children to identify the interventions and supports which will help improve outcomes
- Providing the vehicle for motivating and achieving change in families

How can core groups be more effective?

Research and audit confirms the view that core groups are not always as effective or focused as they could and should be. This can be improved by:

- **Practitioners being clear themselves** about the purpose, aims and tasks of the core group
- **Practitioners being clear with parents and children** about the purpose, aims and tasks of the core group
- **Practitioners sustaining their attendance** at meetings and commitment to the core group. Research suggests that there is a falling off of interagency collaboration after the initial child protection conference. Yet core groups cannot be effective in the absence of key people and not attending gives a very clear message to parents and children
- **Practitioners preparing parents and children to participate** in core groups eg how to express views, how to appropriately challenge opinions, clarifying expectations (what they can expect from practitioners, what you expect from them), clarifying what is and isn't negotiable
- **Deciding the information which will be needed to enable monitoring** of the plan. How will the core group know that progress is being made? Who will collect information? How will it be collected? How will it be presented to core group members? Providing answers to these questions at the outset is essential if monitoring is to be as robust and rigorous as it can be. (See also *Rough Guide to Outcomes*)
- **Full and honest information sharing** which is related to the implementation of the plan. If practitioners are unable to attend a meeting, a report should be submitted to the Chair in advance providing information about progress of the plan and achievement of desired outcomes or a well briefed colleague should attend
- **Recognition of the different roles and responsibilities** of core group members
- **Recognition of the valuable contribution of parents and children.** Parents and children usually have views and ideas about what will improve their situation. These should be taken into account and incorporated into the plan wherever possible
- **All members of the core group maintaining a focus on the protection plan.** This is essential for keeping everyone on track, for ensuring that everyone is doing what they should be doing, that outcomes or desired results are being achieved. It is about focusing on the detail of the solutions and not the problems. It also allows for necessary adjustments to be made to the plan if there are unexpected occurrences
- **Recognition of small changes.** Trying to achieve the desired results (outcomes) quickly in huge steps is generally unrealistic and often very frustrating, for families and practitioners alike. An initial focus on agreeing the detail of a series of small and specific

changes to achieve the results is more manageable, can give everyone involved a real sense of achievement as the plan is implemented and is more likely to achieve the outcomes more quickly (one small change is likely to lead to further change)

Recording core group meetings

Core group members will need to spend some time considering how records will be made of meetings. There should not be an expectation that the same practitioner both chairs and minutes core group meetings. Whilst not impossible, both tasks cannot be done effectively and robustly at the same time. (See also *Rough Guide to Recording and Report Writing*).

Whilst the core group clearly needs to have a record of the detailed protection plan, certain information needs to be captured clearly within the minutes:

- Date, time, venue and purpose of the meeting eg 'Core group meeting regarding
- The people who attended and those who gave apologies or who were absent.
- The name of the person chairing the meeting and the person making the notes.
- Any reports provided by those who didn't attend.
- Explicit statements about whether individual aspects of the plan are progressing, whether there was consensus or dispute about any progress or lack of progress and the reasons for the lack of progress. (It might be beneficial to use the headings from the plan to structure the minutes).
- Any adjustments made to the plan.
- The voice of the child should be evident in the minutes even if the child has not attended.
- A summary commentary providing a clear overview of progress in relation to implementing the plan might be useful.
- Before the meeting ends, checks for accuracy should be undertaken with core group members regarding the key action points agreed, the people responsible for progressing the actions and the timescales for completion.
- The date, time and venue for the next meeting.

*The Rough Guides have
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Sources of information and further reading

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