Luton Borough Council Children’s Services

Introduction of the Strengthening Families approach in Child Protection – good practice guidance document

1. Introduction

Strengthening Families is a new and inclusive approach to risk assessment and planning in child protection conferences. It is designed to create a shared focus between professionals and family members which promotes safety for the child. The approach is aimed at:

- helping families to participate more fully,
- Assisting all participants to assess the risk to the child(ren) more accurately
- Assisting all participants to be more engaged in the development and implementation of a Child Protection (CP) plan.

It requires professionals to be clear and concise in the way they gather and present information and contribute to the conference. The overall aim is to ensure that parents, children and professionals are working positively together to ensure that the main aim is achieved, that is; the safety of children.

This document outlines the approach, and sets out how your responsibilities in the conference and planning processes will be different.

2. The Approach

The Strengthening Families approach was developed out of the Signes of Safety model of practice originally developed by Steve Edwards and Andrew Turnell on ‘Signs of Safety’ (1999). This model supports assessment of risk using a strength and resilience model to engage children, young people and families.

In 2000, the model was further developed by Rob Sawyer and Suzanne Lohrbach (Olmsted County Child & Family Services in Minnesota) who developed a family case planning conference (FCPC) that built upon the ideas of Andrew Turnell as well as the general principles of restorative practice and the Family Group Conference process. An evaluation conducted by Minnesota in 2002 was extremely positive. Families reported feeling respected, listened to and relevant to the process and the approach is now used in Minnesota as an alternative justice intervention, the aim of which is to achieve agreement on contested child protection matters within the court system.
From Western Australia in the 1990s to Professor Eileen Munro in England in 2011-12, there has been an expressed desire to move away from an overuse of policy and procedure to on-the-ground human practice that makes a constructive difference for professionals and families, and creates meaningful safety for children in high-risk cases.

The approach is now used in 50 jurisdictions in 12 countries including West Berks, Oxfordshire, Brent, Gateshead, Hackney and others in the UK. It is consistent with developing clear, outcome, focused plans which are understood and owned by all parties. Recent research findings:

- Parents say they are clearer about what is expected of them and receive more relevant support
- The approach is open and encourages transparent decision-making
- The professionals had to be specific about their concerns for the child’s safety
- This encouraged better presentation of evidence
- Once set out, the risks did not have to continually be revisited

Three principles underpin the approach:

- **Constructive working relationships;** between professionals and family members, and between professionals themselves

- **Thinking critically;** all processes that support and inform practice foster a questioning approach or a spirit of respectful inquiry as the core professional stance of the child protection practitioner

- **Rigour, skillfulness and greater depth of practice;** Work is based on evidenced based practice which is known to be effective

**3. Risk Assessment**

Professionals working in child protection are constantly assessing whether the care of the child is safe enough for the child to stay within the family or whether it is so dangerous that the child must be removed. The task of ‘assessing risk’ is one that it done constantly after every contact with a child. The ‘Signs of Safety’ approach to risk assessment adopts a comprehensive approach to risk that:

- Explores harm and danger while at the same time inquiring into strengths and capacity
- Brings out clearly articulated professional knowledge while also drawing on family knowledge and wisdom
- Undertakes the risk assessment process with the full involvement of all stakeholders, including professionals, family members and young people
The approach brings this together into a one page format which maps the harm, danger, complicating factors, strengths, existing and required safety and a safety judgment in situations where children are at risk of harm, and informs the child protection intervention.

At its simplest it contains **three domains** for inquiry:
1. **What are we worried about?** *(Past harm, future danger and complicating factors)*
2. **What’s working well?** *(Existing strengths and safety)*
3. **What needs to happen?** *(Future safety)*

The Strengthening Families assessment and planning form which will be used in Child Protection Conferences expands on this and addresses the following:
- Current risks and dangers (what are we worried about in relation to this child?)
- Safety and protective factors (what is working well?)
- Family Strengths (what strengths and resource can the family draw on?)
- Any historic complicating factors
- Grey Areas – issues as yet unclear but which need further exploration
- What specifically needs to happen to keep the child safe?
4. Luton’s commitment to the Strengthening Families Programme

A feasibility study for introducing the approach in Luton was conducted by members of the Independent Reviewing Office and Conference Chair Team, reporting in April 2013. The clear finding was that the Strengthening Families model of child protection conferencing would lead to improved practice and outcomes for children. It recommended that the model be adopted for use in Luton by the Council and partner agencies.

The evaluation identified the following reasons to change:

- Recent audits within Luton have identified a lack of outcome focus in relation to action planning.
- Nationally, findings from recent OFSTED inspections highlighted a lack of robust contingency plans.
- Membership of child protection conferences have consistently identified that conferences focus heavily on information sharing, leaving insufficient time for analysis, critical thinking, planning and developing child protection plans. (This is supported by Professor Munro’s research)
- Child protection plans are often overly long, and insufficiently focused on risk management and making things safer for children.
- There is a need to improve consistency of chairing and minute taking styles between conferences.
- There is some evidence that Child Protection Plans have not been followed by Core Groups, and the minutes of child protection conferences are not seen as a useful tool to improve the safety and well-being of children.
- The techniques used within the Strengthening Families model are already used throughout Luton in early intervention services, and by voluntary agencies in projects which work directly with vulnerable families. Parents and professionals will be familiar with the way in which information is presented, analysed, promoting participation and commitment.
- The model has been adapted and adopted for child protection conferences with significant benefits in other local authorities, and is emerging as an example of evidence informed best practice nationally.
- Conference Chairs in Luton identified that the voice of the child within the current child protection conference model is not regularly heard. Child attendance and participation in conferences is currently poor.

5. Key stages in the Model

1. Decision to hold a Child Protection Conference
   The decision to hold a child protection conference is made in the same way as at present, following Working Together 2103 guidance and local procedures. Invitations will be sent out via this service.
2. Reports to conference
Reports to conference by both multi agency partners and social workers will present the information under the five headings in Section 3 page 3 above. A new Multi Agency Report to Conference template and Social Worker Report to Conference template have been developed which can be completed and submitted electronically. (See Appendices xx)

3. Preparation for conference
Social workers should brief the family and young person about the conference process, particularly how they can contribute. Explanatory leaflets are available which should be given to family members and the young person. An interim leaflet is available and it is planned that we will review this interim leaflet, in consultation with children / young people and parents during 2014.

Family members should be made aware of any information which the social workers include in their report, which should be shared with the family prior to conference.

All reports should be submitted to the Conference Team at least 3 days prior to the conference date. (see local procedures). These should be shared with the parents / carers and children prior to the conference, giving sufficient time for them to read and understand them, usually at least 24 hours in advance.

Key family participants are met by the conference chair person 15 minutes prior to the start of the conference. The purpose of this is to explain the format of the conference and how they can share information and participate in the process. Practical issues will be checked out with them e.g. where they will sit, what is expected of them and others, what they can do if they feel uncomfortable or upset.

4. Organisation of the conference
The conference is held in a room designated for the purpose. The approach requires the information to be organised and presented so that it can be seen by all participants. There will be a large flipchart/electronic white board on which the conference chair will write up the information from all participants, under the five headings. This information is visible to all.

5. At the conference
The Chair will have an active, facilitative, challenging and enabling role. They will also be responsible for summarising and recording key information shared by participants onto the whiteboard. (NB A record of the meeting will also be kept by the conference minute taker).
The family and other participants are introduced to the conference, and the chair explains the reason for and purpose of the conference, and the fact that it is a meeting convened according to the LSCB procedures.

6. **Sharing and discussing information**

Information from individual agencies, and from the parents and family members, is discussed and the key points recorded on the assessment and planning chart under the following headings.

- Current risks and dangers
- Historical and complicating factors
- Children and young people’s views
- Grey areas/things we now need to know more about
- Safety and protective factors
- Family strengths

7. **The Plan**

Experience suggests that around 50% of time in conference should be spent on gathering and analysing information and 50% on planning. There is an assumption that all conferences will result in a plan of some sort, but that the conference members will decide what type of plan is required to meet the needs (Child Protection, Child in Need/ family support, Chid with additional needs) after the plan is formulated.

One driver for change is the acknowledgement that current Child Protection Plans are not focused on creating safety for the child but tend to be a list of services to be put in place.

Strengthening Families focuses on the purpose of professional intervention being to create and ensure the children are safe in their daily life. Safety is regarded as the specific arrangements that will help a child to be protected in situations where they may have previously been harmed or in situations where they are at risk of being hurt or where their basic needs are unmet.

The goal is to arrive at everyday changes in family living arrangements that show the child is safe both emotionally and physically and that their basic needs are being met to a good enough standard.

Professionals will be expected to clearly define what they want to see to feel confident that the child will be protected and safe.
The plan will set out ‘the what, the how, the who and the when’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desired outcome</th>
<th>Methods and actions to achieve it</th>
<th>By whom and when</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What we would want to see in order to be sure the child(ren) are safe / cared for? (Positive statements)</td>
<td>What actions are needed to keep the child safe? What do we need to further understand? (Assessment)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This analysis is used to develop the plan for the child and family. This plan relates to the risks identified in the analysis and details specific actions needed.

It is important that plans are clear and unambiguous.

The decision as to whether this is a child protection or family support plan is made once the plan has been completed. A contingency plan is identified in the event of the original plan being unsuccessful in ensuring children safety and well-being.

Dates of the first core group and review conference are agreed and recorded.

8. Roles and responsibilities: good practice

8.1 All professionals
- Familiarise yourself with the approach
- Prepare – yourselves, the child or young person and any family member you work with
- Support family members and young people to attend and participate meaningfully
- Organise your information about the child and family under the five headings, submit your report using the agreed format, and be willing to contribute this in conference
- Remain focused on the safety of the child and what you can do to contribute to a safety plan – be prepared to contribute to implementation of the plan
- Support the Chair, who will be operating a new system
- Treat all conference participants with respect and listen to what they each have to contribute
- Give feedback on the process and be prepared to contribute to an evaluation of the impact after six months
8.2 Social worker

- As above
- Ensure the child(ren) views wishes and feelings are sought and appropriately represented at the conference either by the social worker or the person identified as most appropriate to do this.
- Contribute actively to the development of the plan and be prepared to implement it
- Convene and lead core groups, which will have a key role in taking forward and overseeing plans

8.3 The Chair

- Pay respectful attention to and aim to engage each person
- The meeting may be serious but it does not have to be tense
- Drill for facts and detail – build a picture
- Marshall and manage information
- Everything comes back to the child’s experience – impact on them
- Remember that it is not about balancing numbers of risk and safety factors – one risk factor can outweigh all safety aspects

9. Templates

The following templates are attached to this document as Appendices and can be accessed at:

- Social Worker report to conference
- Multi Agency report to conference
- Template for recording information on the whiteboard in conference
- Child Protection Plan
- Initial and Review Child Protection Conference Minutes
- Core Group minutes
- Parent’s consultation form
- Children’s consultation form
- Three Houses direct work sheets

10. Linked Policy and Procedures

Please see the Luton Safeguarding Children Board interagency safeguarding procedures for further information about child protection conferences.