Child Protection Conferences: Guidance for Professionals

Cumberland believes that the best place for children to grow up is within their families and networks, where they have the potential to care for them safely. We are committed to working in partnership with families to keep children safe and grounded in Signs of Safety as our approach to practice. Signs of Safety (SofS) is a strengths-based, solution-focused approach to working with children and families. SofS focuses on building strengths into safety in the child's naturally occurring network by understanding "what works" and coaching parents and their networks to build safety. SofS provides a common language to help all professionals involved with a family to assess the risk of harm and develop plans to promote the child's safety. SofS stresses the importance of working alongside families to help them make positive changes, rather than automatically imposing our own solutions on them. It is also essential that we keep our language straightforward and avoid using professional jargon, as this can be confusing for families and lead to less effective safety planning.

A new child protection conference agenda has been introduced. This brought practice further in line with Signs of Safety principles and align with our new Signs of Safety Liquid Logic IT Solution. The Signs of Safety Liquid Logic IT Solution supports us in our practice, by helping us to have the right focus and ask the right questions when safety planning with children and families.

This guidance outlines the principles and processes of how conferences will be run in line with our new ways of working, and Child Protection Conferences being held on virtual platforms.

Principles of Child Protection Conferences

At conferences, you will notice:

- Increased emphasis on **parental and network involvement** during conferences. The IRO will focus many of their questions on the parents and their network.
- An expectation that we'll all use **straightforward family-friendly language** – sometimes this is harder than it sounds! Even everyday professional language, such as neglect, domestic violence, significant harm and so on, can be unfamiliar to families and makes it harder for them to understand what it is we're worried about and what we're asking of them. We will describe the specific behaviour we are worried about in clear and accessible language, rather than vague professional jargon.
- A focus **on existing strengths and safety**, and what the family are already doing well to keep the children safe. A key SofS principle is that change comes from building on what is already working well.
- **Working in partnership with families** for them to come up with their own safety plan to show their children will be safe, rather than professionals imposing solutions on them that are service-led. For all of us, sustainable change comes from within, not when it is imposed upon us.
- **Children and their Families should be as prepared as possible** for conferences. We recognise that these can be daunting meetings for families, so they should not also be having to absorb a lot of new information about their parenting and their children during it. There should be no surprises for them. Therefore, **it is essential that all professional reports are shared** with families in advance of the conference and that Danger Statements and Safety Goals have been created in partnership with the family prior to the conference.
- A focus on **'pressure-testing' safety plans** to know they are working and providing actions to the Core Group to support future safety planning if necessary. Also to discuss contingency arrangements should safety plans not succeed.
- **Families' naturally occurring networks** being invited into conferences and Core Groups as critical partners in the safety plan, with an emphasis on gradually passing the safety plan over to the family and network to monitor and manage safety for the children. The plan is created and owned by the family and their network, supported by the social workers, so the family and network will be included in all meetings about their plan.

Principles of Child Protection Conferences

In your report to the child protection conference (CPC), you are asked to contribute by giving a balance of information about what you consider to be the strengths in the family and your worries for the child/ren. It is expected that you will have spoken to the family about your worries, so that it won't come as a surprise to them when they are at the CPC. You are asked to comment on what the child and family's wishes and feelings are, as well as your own views.

What is working well?

Consider all the things that are in place when things are working well for the child and family. Think about all the existing strengths and existing safety in the child's family and network that provide safety and protect the child from any potentially harmful experiences.

What are you worried about?

Consider actual or likely significant harm in relation to the individual child's age and circumstances. When thinking about actual 'past' harm the child may have experienced, you should consider: the duration, frequency, and context in which the harm takes place, the severity of the harm and what impact it has on the child's health and wellbeing. When you are thinking about likely future danger to the child, you should consider how probable it is that 'past' harm will occur again and if it did, how serious that would be. Also consider any complicating factors and ensure you don't just list them as being harmful. Complicating factors are those things that make a situation more difficult to manage, but don't necessarily directly cause harm to the child/ren.

What needs to change?

Consider what needs to change and what your agency can contribute to promote safety and to help keep the child safe in the future. This will inform the safety planning for the child at the CPC.

Child Protection Agenda
Family & Network Details

- It is important a genogram (or family map) is completed and considered prior to the conference, as apart from placing families as the expert in their own situation at the start of the conference (therefore making it easier for them to participate throughout), it underlines the importance of their network in creating enough safety around the child for Children's Services to no longer be involved.
- Although professionals may worry that someone in the family's network is risky or a 'bad influence', dictating that the parents shouldn't have contact with this person is likely to be ineffective and will affect positive working relationships. The reality is they are in the family's network, so honest and open discussion needs to be encouraged as they may be able to offer something positive to support the parents, even if the Local Authority can't support them having direct care of the child/ren.

The IRO will ask questions around the quality and importance of relationships:
- Who does the child say is the most important person in their life?
- Who do the parents say are the people around them that help and support them?
- Who are the most important professionals involved with the child and family?

What has got us to this point?

- Parents are asked early in the conference 'Why do you think we are worried about your child?' This is so conference members are clear about what the parents understand, even if they disagree with the worries.
- It is important parents explain this in their own words, or they will be unable to make the link between the dangers, and what needs to happen to show that the child/ren will be safe.

The IRO will ask questions around:
- What was the first event in the family's life that brought Children's Services involvement with the family and what was the impact of that on the child?

- What was the worst event in the family's life that brought Children's Services involvement, and what was the Impact on the child?
- What was the most recent event in the family's life (if different) that brought Children's Services involvement with the family and what was the impact of that on the child?

What are we worried about / What is working well?

- This section is a dynamic mapping where the IRO will facilitate a discussion with the family and their network, as well as professionals, to give independent oversight on all the information brought into Conference.
- The IRO will focus on the Analysis categories with the SofS mapping analysis categories:

What are we worried about?
- Harm
- Complicating Factors

What is working well?
- Existing Strengths
- Existing Safety

Child and Parent's Involvement

- It is essential that any direct work with children has been linked to the worries and the reason for our involvement with the child/ren. If this is not clear or has not been possible for reasons such as criminal investigations and so on, the IRO will dig into this and plans for undertaking this should be made. Without this direct link, we risk getting a 'wish list' which may be less helpful in terms of understanding the child's lived experience.
- Children need to understand why we are worried. If they are to be involved in safety planning, they need to understand why there is a need for a plan. It is also important to know what children are aware of, what they may have overheard, what they are worried about and what they have questions about. This will help shape the Words and Pictures explanation to them and enable their voices to inform safety planning.
- As well as the child's involvement in the Conference the IRO will also encourage full participation by parents/carer(s) and how they have been supported to fully engage in the planning, meetings, and discussions.

The IRO will consider:
- How has the child contributed to the conference?
- How has the parent/carer(s) contributed to the conference?

Analysis and Judgement

- The social worker will read out the danger statements and safety goals. You will be asked what your current scaling score are in relation to these, as this will provide a judgement across the lifetime of the case and should be reviewed at each core group/CIN meeting/conference. The scaling is linked to the Danger Statement and Safety Goals so they form a trio.
- The IRO will consider whether the current Danger Statements and Safety Goals adequately reflect the information that has been presented in the conference.
- IRO Overall Progress and Safety Scale: The IRO will then review the overall progress and scale.

Conference Decision

The Conference will apply the decision-making guidance:
- Considering the discussions in the conference, should the child be supported by a Child in Need Plan or a Child Protection Plan?
- Please consider and outline the recommendations from each professional as to whether the child should be supported by a Child in Need or a Child Protection Plan
- Professional disagreement should not detract from ensuring a child is safeguarded. Disagreement between professionals may happen within the meeting or while working with the child/ren or family. Disagreements should be able to be resolved with discussion. Where disagreements cannot be resolved agencies need to follow the Escalation Policy and Procedure which can be found here.

What Needs to Happen?

- The IRO will give independent oversight and pressure testing of the plan which includes:

1.1. Immediate safety
- What immediate actions have professionals taken to keep the child safe?
- How have the family and network kept the child safe?

1.2. Bottom lines how have the family and network kept the child safe?
- Professional bottom lines are the minimum that must happen and cannot be compromised on for the safety plan to work.

1.3. Timeline

1.4. Words and pictures
- Have the words and pictures been written and shared with the network?
- When was it done? (please ensure this has been attached)

1.5. Who is involved in the plan?
- Name and role - how often will they see the child? - what are the specific tasks of this person? - network lead

1.6. Plan rules
- The plan rules will address each concerning behaviour in turn. Moving from what is working well on to stressors and triggers for 'red flag' or emergency events and consider who will do what when problems arise.

1.7. Recording and demonstrating the plan
- Has a children's version of the plan been created and shared with the child?
- How are the family demonstrating use of the plan? - safety journal
- How is it kept up to date and who is responsible for it?
- Does the child or young person have a safety object?

1.8. Conference actions
- What needs to be done? What do professionals need to do and who will do it?
- What do the family/network need to do and who will do it?
- When does action need to be done by? When completed list how and when done and what difference did it make?

1.9. Core Groups Members