**West Sussex – Practice Guidance**

IROs are qualified social workers with at least five years’ experience, and who have acquired the right skills to carry out this role.

**Family Network Meetings (FNM’s)**

**Principles**

The more complex and risky a child protection case, the greater the number of professionals that may be involved. When child protection professionals are considering undertaking a safety planning process with parents, it is vital that all key professionals have discussed, are committed to, and know their role in the process. It is the role of the allocated Social Worker and/ or Team Advanced Practitioner to arrange and facilitate FNM’s and Review FNM’s.

**Purpose**

FNM’s are a key part of safeguarding as they provide the opportunity to explore the family and friends’ network that already provide safety and those who could become part of the safety plan for each child. The meetings enable the family and friends’ network and professionals to develop and agree outcomes that they want to achieve.

**Establishing a Working Relationship with the Family**

* Building safety plans that are meaningful and sustainable will require a robust working relationship between the child protection professionals and the parents/family. The simplest way to create a good working relationship with parents is for the professionals to continually identify and honour the parents for everything that is positive in their everyday care of their children. In this way, parents will be much more likely to listen to the workers’ views about the problems and more likely to work with them through the challenges involved in building a lasting safety plan.

**A Straightforward, Understandable Description of the Child Protection Concerns**

* Beginning the safety process depends on child protection professionals being able to articulate the danger they see for the children in clear, simple language that the parents (even if they do not agree) can understand and will work on with the professionals. Clear, commonly understood danger statements are essential since they define the fundamental issues that the safety plan must address.

**Safety Goals**

* Research with parents involved with child protection services repeatedly reports that parents want to know what they must do to satisfy child protection authorities in order to get them out of their lives. Once the child protection agency is clear about its danger statements, these form the basis to articulate straightforward behavioural safety goals to tell parents what the agency needs to see to be satisfied that the children will be safe.

**Bottom Lines**

* The easiest way to distinguish between safety goals and bottom lines is to think of the difference between what and how. The goals articulate what must be achieved; the bottom line requirements are the professional conditions of how this must be achieved.

As much as possible, it is best that the family and their network come up with the details of how the safety goals will be achieved so professionals can keep their bottom line requirements to an absolute minimum. This in turn creates maximum opportunity for the family to develop as much of the specific detail of the safety plan as possible.

Typical bottom lines in Signs of Safety safety planning are the requirement of a safety network and a clear explanation of the problems for the children. Many child protection cases involve parents struggling with damaging drug or alcohol use. It is usual in these cases that professionals seek to impose a bottom line of sobriety and are thereby caught up in monitoring sobriety rather than safety. In the Signs of Safety approach the preferred bottom line is to say to the parents, ‘Our issue is child safety, so you get to choose if this is a safety plan based on sobriety or on plans for who will do what when one of you drinks or uses.’

**Involve an Extensive, Informed Friend and Family Safety Network**

* Every traditional culture knows the wisdom of the African saying ‘It takes a village to raise a child’. A child who is connected to many people who care for him/ her will almost always have a better life experience and be safer than an isolated child. So safety planning work almost always involves requiring that the parents get as many people as they can involve in helping them create a safety plan. One of the most important aspects of involving an informed and naturally occurring network around the family is that this breaks the secrecy and shame that typically surrounds situations of child abuse.

**Negotiating the How: Developing the Details of the Safety Plan**

* When developing the details of any given safety plan it is important to give parents and everyone else involved (both layperson and professional) a vision of the sort of detailed safety plan that will satisfy the statutory authorities. With this done, the professionals’ role is then to ask the parents and network to come up with their best thinking about how to show everybody, including the child protection agency, that the children will be safe and looked after well. This is an evolving conversation as the professionals constantly deepen the parents’ and networks’ thinking about all the issues the professionals see, while at the same time exploring the challenges then parents and network foresee. The trick here is for professionals to break the habit of trying to solve issues themselves and instead explain their concerns openly and see what the parents and the network can suggest and do.

**Successive Reunification and Monitoring Progress**

* Within the Signs of Safety approach, safety is as ‘strengths demonstrated as a protection over time’. As the safety plan is being developed it is important that opportunities are created for the family to test, refine and demonstrate the new living arrangements over time. As this occurs, their success and progress in using the plan is monitored and supported initially by the child protection professionals, but increasingly this role is handed over to the safety network. Most safety plans in the highest risk cases are created when the family is separated, either with the children in alternative care or the alleged abuser out of the family home. As the parents and family members engage in, and progress with, the safety planning process, it is important that the child protection agency reward the parents’ efforts and build their hope and momentum by successively increasing their contact with their children and loosening up the professional controls on the contact arrangements. Once a safety planning process has begun, it is important that momentum and focus is maintained and that a completion date is identified. Safety planning usually takes between 3 and 12 months.

**Process**

* Provide a genogram and ecomap (not a Framework-i system linked genogram) for the purpose of the meeting.
* Prepare draft or updated Danger/ Worry Statements for each themed worry. Danger/ Worry Statements can be updated from the most recent completed mapping with the family.
* Prepare clear safety goals in order for the family and their support network to understand what it is that needs to change for the local authority to no longer feel worried about the child/ren. The safety goals form the basis of the family’s safety plan.
* Clear bottom lines need to be agreed between the social worker and your Practice Manager (PM) and or Group Manager (GM) before the FNM. These should be recorded by the PM in the supervision record or as a management oversight in case notes. Bottom lines are all the realistic non-negotiable expectations the local authority have about the family in order to ensure change.
* Have a discussion with the parent/s or carer/s and child (age appropriate) using plain simple language to explain the purpose and impact of a FNM.
* Explore realistic time scales for a FNM with the parent/s, carer/s and child/ren (age appropriate) based on the existing risk factors for the child/ren at that time.
* Encourage and convince the family to attend the meeting with a support network of their own choice i.e. extended family members, friends, neighbours, community leaders, legal representatives and any other professionals etc. There is no limit with regard to how big the network needs to be as long as the network understands that they are attending the meeting because they want to support the carer/s or parent/s to support the child/ren. Parent/s or carer/s or child/ren need to know that the bottom line is that the meeting cannot go ahead without a support network present at the meeting.
* Many families will say that they have no one to bring to the meeting. If this comes up please use the “questions to Assist in Finding Networks”. (Please see number 4, paragraph 2 of the Policy, Procedures and Practice Guidance)
* Prepare the parents that the duration of the meeting could last up to 3 hours maximum with breaks throughout. This will allow the parents and their support network to make the necessary arrangements in terms of child care, drop offs and picks for children from school, employment and all other appointments. Same message needs to be given to professionals who will be invited and attending the meeting.
* Put the ownership back to the parent/s or carer/s and or child (age appropriate) to make contact with the people they want to invite to the meeting. Provide contact details in case any of the support network wants to make contact to obtain clarity about the purpose of the meeting.
* Seek administrative support with booking a venue/ room in any of the council buildings in West Sussex where the child is resident. Ensure that the venue is convenient and easy to get to for the family and their support network. Ensure that the venue is spacious enough.
* FNMs should not be used as intense mapping exercises. It is expected that social work teams use the last completed mapping document to update the meeting on what are the worries the local authority have about the child/ren and what is happening for the child/ ren that is working well.

**Suggested Agenda:**

**a) Introduction:**

* Facilitator (allocated SW and/ or AP) introduce him/herself to the family and their support network
* Facilitator ask that everyone else introduce themselves and to state what their relationship is to the child/ren and parent/s or carer/s i.e. grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend to mother/ father, solicitor for which parent/ carer, children’s guardian etc.
* Check out that everyone is clear and aware why they are attending this meeting
* Explain to the family and the support network that West Sussex Children’s Social Care is developing a more collaborative way of working with children and families where families feel involved with the decision making and planning of how the department will work with them as a family.
* Explain briefly about the way we work in West Sussex using Signs of Safety (SoS) in terms of the worries, working well and next steps.
* Remind all present of the 3 hour maximum duration of the meeting.
* Inform that regular breaks will take place during the meeting.

**b) Ground Rules:**

* Check beforehand whether any fire drills will take place while the meeting is on and inform everyone present about this and point out the nearest fire exits.
* Point out the toilets for everyone’s convenience.
* Respect for the person who is speaking by not speaking over him/ her or not to make comments underneath the breath.
* Only one person to speak at a time.
* Attack issue, not the person.
* Use plain simple appropriate language to explain things or to share information so everyone present understands.
* No question is a stupid question, seek clarity if you do not understand what has been said.
* Emphasised that any solicitor present for the meeting will take on the role of an observer.

**c) Process of the meeting:**

*Put three sheets of flip chart paper on the wall with headings Worries, Working Well and Next Steps (use masking tape to stick paper on the wall) before the meeting starts.*

**Step 1:**

* Use the genogram and ecomap provided by the social worker to check out the accuracy of the family composition and draw this on flip chart paper on the wall.
* Explore in detail the support network around the family.

**Step 2:**

* Provide copies of the social work teams draft worry/danger statements and safety gaols to everyone present.
* Ask the social worker to read out the draft worry/ danger statements and safety gaols.
* Check out with the family and their support network their understanding of the worry/danger statements.
* Check out with the family and their support network their understanding of the local authority’s expectations (safety gaols and bottom line/s).
* The aim is to co- create worry/danger statements with families. The social worker should take notes of any suggested amendments by the family and add this later to the existing worry/danger statements which will be send out as part of the minutes of the meeting. This demonstrate a well formed balance of two sides to a story without being dismissive of what the family’s view is of what the local authority is worried about.
* The social worker’s worry/danger statement will not be changed, unless the information is not factual.

**Step 3:**

* Scale the safety of the child/ren in the care of the parent/s or carer/s on a scale

0 10 based on the worry/ danger statements provided and read out by the social worker.

* Define both ends of the scale (what o means and what 10 means).
* Ask everyone to scale and to provide a rating and the reason/s for their specific rating.
* Ask everyone what needs to happen/ what they need to see different to move them up the scale.
* Use flip chart paper to do this exercise on the wall.

**Step 4:**

* If there is an updated mapping document available, copies could be shared with everyone present. This will help keeping the focus on the current worries and working wells with the social worker reading them out.
* The facilitator then ask the parent/s, carer/s or the children (if age appropriate) and the support network whether there is anything they want to add to the worries/ working wells from what they have heard or whether there is anything they think is no longer relevant in relation to the existing worries. This process will take the format of a quick mapping to illicit the queries raised and to clarify the evidence using the three columns on the wall.
* If there is no document available to share the social worker needs to address the meeting and inform all present about the current worries and working wells using the same mapping process.

**Step 5:**

* Draw the family and their support network’s attention to the safety goals provided by the social worker.
* Provide the family with flip chart paper pens and advise that the group needs to select someone within the group who will do the scribbling.
* Explain to the family and the support network that they will be given time to work together round the table and come up with a detailed safety plan that will address each of the safety goals.
* Advise to use plain simple language for everyone to understand, even for the child/ren if someone reads it out to them.
* Facilitator explains to the family and their network that he/she will take on the role of advisor and will guide them when they feel stuck or need clarity while working on the plan.
* Facilitator emphasised that the family and their support network need to own the plan.
* Advise the family and their network to be realistic about what they can achieve and do.
* Advise that the plan needs to incorporate who will be involved (named persons), what they will do, when they will do it (time, date, days), how often it will be done, what will happen if the original plan does not work for some reason/ if the named people cannot do the specific tasks, is there a backup plan in place.
* Facilitator have a discussion with the family and support network and ask them to start thinking about who will be best suitable in the network to care for the child/ren long term if the parent/s or carer/s are not able to do so (explain the Viability Assessment process).

**Step 6:**

* Facilitator remains in the room whilst the family and their support network are discussing and finalising their safety plan.
* Facilitator ensures that the group sticks with the time available and therefore constantly remind them of how much time they have left to come up with a good enough safety plan.
* Should the family not be able to complete the safety plan on the day the facilitator will advise that the group take some time out outside this meeting to complete the safety plan.
* Facilitator negotiate a realistic but tight deadline when some of the support network and family, if not all, could meet with the social work team to present the safety plan. This is not relevant when a child is at immediate risk of harm.

**Step 7:**

* Once the family and their support network has completed the safety plan will have the opportunity to hear the plan read out by a member of the support network.
* The social work team will provide feedback and ask questions in relation to the plan if feels that the plan is not meeting all or some of the safety goals i.e. it is not rigid or firm enough, it is not realistic, it is not child and safety centred etc.
* Based on the feedback from the social work team the family and the support network will need to amend the safety plan in order to satisfy the local authority.

**Step 8:**

* The meeting finishes once the social work team is satisfied with the plan.
* Facilitator scales the safety of the child/ren with the proposed safety plan in place.
* Set a date for a Review Family Network Meeting.