**Multi-Professional Practice and Liaison with Partner Agencies**

**Introduction**

Safeguarding is not one person’s responsibility. To truly keep children, young people and their families safe and promote welfare; is a collaborative effort. Multi-professional working has always been a core and fundamental feature of sound social work practice. Arguably, this has never been as vital as it is right now in light of the required changes to practice in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The need for virtual working has taken over more traditional approaches. Although we have embraced and getting used to this way of working, physical contacts/interactions are not occurring as frequently as we and families are accustomed with. This has meant that direct interpersonal contact between professionals and families has lessened although the things we were concerned about have remained (and even increased given the impact of the global challenge). Therefore the safety net and support we create with our professional colleague’s more than ever needs to be consistent, proactive, organised, dynamic and sophisticated at every point of the child’s journey with us. Now and into the future effective partnership working with professionals has to underpin our efforts so we can say with confidence that our families are safe and will continue to achieve positive outcomes regardless of practice alterations or circumstances.

**It’s our duty**

Professional liaison and working collectively in the best interests of our children and their families is a duty enshrined in law. It is not optional and should be happening on behalf of all families at all times: Working Together 2018 stipulates *“effective sharing of information between practitioners and local organisations and agencies is essential for early identification of need, assessment and service provision to keep children safe”.*

Alongside our legal responsibilities, Buckinghamshire’s practice model of Strengthening Families further captures the importance and necessity of joint working with our partners recognising that:

* Families are considered holistically within an approach that is collaborative, purposeful and impactful, understanding that all professionals are part of the network with their own role to play and influence.
* Establishing partnership between families and professionals so that everyone will cooperate and work towards mutually agreed goals in the best interests of children.
* Providing concrete support in times of need.
* Strengthening social connections for families encouraging effective support networks to develop, sustain and maintain stability and safety for children.

**Key features of effective professional partnership and liaison**

* Effective and proactive communication that is reciprocal
* Positive professional relationships that are respectful, transparent and constructive
* Triangulation
* Professional curiosity
* Sharing professional knowledge and expertise
* Shared accountability and responsibility
* All of the above leads to an increased understanding of the child’s lived experience and their world

**How we do it**

**Understand: Who are the network?**

It is vital that you have a detailed understanding of all professional involvements with families you are supporting leading to more effective/purposeful input, shared responsibility and accountability to optimise support packages for those in need. You need to have a “bird’s eye view” and awareness of all professionals that come into a child’s life, knowing their influence, relationship, contribution and value (including yourself).

**Ask yourself:** Who are they? What is their role and position? What is the remit of their organisation? What are their skills/knowledge and expertise? What is their professional background and training? That is the purpose of their professional intervention? What intervention/support are they providing? How are they providing their intervention including delivery and frequency? What approach/evidence base are they working from? What are the boundaries to their role? What are their professional assessments/judgements and opinions? How are they contributing to child welfare/safety? What value are they providing? Could they provide more? What is their knowledge/understanding of the family (past and present)? What are their views and suggestions? How can we supplement and support each other meet our professional duties/responsibilities in the best interests of the family?

**Practice Point:** Professional Eco-Maps can be a useful tool to outline, consider and understand the professional network around a family. You can see the number of professional involvements and if all assessed needs are met/supported? It may also help highlight if there are any unnecessary involvements providing limited impact.

**Plan: What are we doing?**

Having a clear understanding of who is in the professional network, their role and contribution will lead to better assessment and planning. Liaison and sharing of information enables us to build a clearer picture of a family’s needs/circumstances, including the ongoing risks which are changeable and fluid. This can be achieved via:

* **Welfare checks**
* **Meeting forums**
* **One to one discussions**
* **Observations/feedback**
* **Direct work**

Achieving sound assessment, knowledge and understanding through thorough and consistent professional partnerships will lead to more purposeful planning that is in tune with the family’s needs. Proactive planning involves confidence in knowing what needs to be done, how, by who and when. Effective plans are focused and SMART clearly setting out aims/goals with agreed timescales. Ownership of the plan is the responsibility of families and professionals a like working towards safer and improved outcomes for children/young people. Working in this way will create accountability and ownership over plans agreed whilst encouraging that all invested parties are actively involved with responsibilities shared equally.

**Practice Point:** Meeting forums are a valuable opportunity to exchange information/views and analysing what this means for the child. Therefore, meeting forum’s need to be led in a dynamic way to ensure we have a rich understanding of needs and circumstances to develop focused plans that utilise all available professional resources. During professional discussions or meetings develop contact plans/matrix so that there is a clear and understood plan how and when families will be supported. Outline aims and focuses so each professional has a solid understanding of who is doing what, why and when? This will optimise support for families; avoid duplication and potential undermining of collective efforts. Make sure clear actions are agreed and timescales for achievement set to promote progress, pace and accountability amongst the professional network. This will also enable constructive challenge if parts of the professional network are not fulfilling their role in the way it was agreed and intended, limiting opportunities for drift.

**Practice Point:** Although there are recognised forum’s (Core Groups, CLA Review, Conferences, Care Package Reviews etc) that promote and facilitate professional information sharing/partnership, joint working should not only be occurring at these times. What happens in between formal meetings is just as important as what is discussed and shared within them. Whether for assessment, planning, intervention or review/evaluation meaningful liaison between professionals should be occurring routinely and as frequently as required to ensure child welfare and safety via a range of communication methods in order for plans to be progressed and adjusted as needs and situations do.

**Deliver: Do what we need to do**

Although practice approaches have altered with greater reliance on “virtual working”, every interaction is an intervention. Therefore all professionals within the support network need to make it purposeful and child centred; ensuring that the voice of the child is captured across the multi-agency practice. Providing concrete support and assistance is still very much achievable and should continue to be the focus of our joint professional efforts. There have been some innovative and creative examples of direct work with families virtually. Providing interventions remains is a collaborative process with our professional partners and should be facilitated as such.

Examples and resources are available on Tri.X and via the Practice Development Team. Other useful sources include:

[http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/](https://eur03.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.socialworkerstoolbox.com%2F&data=02%7C01%7CChristopher.Wilkins%40buckinghamshire.gov.uk%7C7578860ea4c742a39dcd08d7e6aa4719%7C7fb976b99e2848e180861ddabecf82a0%7C0%7C0%7C637231491313851938&sdata=TrBoMt%2BRb%2B4oebawbaB%2BxwP7X8SETgFaFeUBJwoUY6Q%3D&reserved=0)

[https://hope4hurtingkids.com/](https://eur03.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fhope4hurtingkids.com%2F&data=02%7C01%7CChristopher.Wilkins%40buckinghamshire.gov.uk%7C7578860ea4c742a39dcd08d7e6aa4719%7C7fb976b99e2848e180861ddabecf82a0%7C0%7C0%7C637231491313851938&sdata=rzQV6ieh7fVTYkrczL72H0UUfVNohtLR5ryROlnvPyw%3D&reserved=0)

**Ask yourself:** How should I approach the family? What is likely to get the best outcome? What is my skill set? What is an appropriate conversation/intervention for me to deliver? What is appropriate be delivered by another professional? Is there any opportunity for a joint piece of work? Are the family clear on what we are hoping to achieve professionally? Are there any barriers to the intervention being attempted? If so, what? Is there a more effective way to intervene?

**Practice Point:** Proactively use your professional networks. Effective collaboration recognises each individuals skill set, qualities and relationship with families. There may be certain tasks that would best be met by someone else in the network. Acknowledge your own contribution and areas outside your particular expertise. Ask for advice and assistance. It may be appropriate to seek consultation from a professional you have a working relationship with that may not be actively involved in a plan but have knowledge and resources (whilst maintaining confidentiality).

**Practice Point**: Although virtual working is a requirement, physical contacts/interventions with families are still necessary in situations where there are concerns of immediate/significant harm. This may need to involve our professional partners. Requests and plans for physical contacts/interventions need to be done with agreement from Team Managers and Heads of Service as outlined within practice guidance.

**Review: Make sure what we are doing is right and benefits the family.**

Progress needs to be monitored and reviewed with families and professionals on an ongoing regular basis. This is to ensure welfare/safety for families is increased with identified objectives being met in the manner in which there were set out and agreed. Via effective communication and networks, triangulation of information can occur to ensure assessment/understanding remains current and plans are sufficient, proportionate and focused towards identified areas. Triangulation of information from a range of trusted sources and methods enables stronger analysis and critical reflection to ensure professional input is appropriate and accessible in each circumstance. This includes how the professional networks are meeting their commitments. Are we delivering the support in the way it was intended and in a way that the family can benefit from? Explore and challenge if goals/objectives have not been met including professionally making clear expectations/consequences to move plans forward for the benefit of those being supported. Good plans evolve.

**Ask yourself:** Has what was proposed, intended and necessary been achieved in the best interest of the child? Have we all played our part? Have we been flexible and creative? Has the professional network been responsive? Was the service offer good enough for this particular family? Do we need to re-visit any parts of the plan/intervention? What would we do differently next time? How do you feel the family will manage moving onto alternative methods/type of professional support? What do they need now and into the future (maintain and sustain resilience and sustainable change)?

**Practice Point**: Professional judgement is needed to determine what level and frequency of professional liaison is required depending on the needs and risk posed. However, they is no such thing as too much professional communication in our endeavours to keep children safe.

**Practice Point:** Establishing and utilising professional networks will be of benefit when considering our exit plans. In the event that the family no longer require a social care intervention, it will be even more important that you are aware of the professional network to continue or be included into the pathway onto universal services so that family’s access targeted and coordinated support that is sufficient to their needs.

**Practice Point:** It is our professional responsibility to ensure and promote that professional partnerships and liaison is active and present throughout the journey of all children supported by our service in real time. It is equally our responsibility to ensure that that partnership working is captured on the child’s electronic file in a clear, concise and apparent way.

**Conclusion**

Effective partnership and liaison is not an isolated activity only happening at certain points and intervals. It has to occur on a continual and persistence basis from the moment we become aware of a family to the moment they safely leave our service.

**Key points to consider for multi-agency working within the COVID-19 pandemic**

* Are children going into school/nursery? If not, how are their education provisions working with the family to support the child’s education? Are parents taking up the offer of resources being shared by the school? Are parents completing the home work with their children? For those more vulnerable children, does the child have a good relationship with a specific member of staff at school who is able to video call and check in to see how they are?
* For children with disabilities, check with their care provider/s as to what level of service they are able to continue offering; what is their contingency plan if their care workers become unwell. How are medical professionals monitoring the child’s health and development? How are they supporting the parents in promoting the child’s health needs without provision of services (if services have stopped or reduced)?
* How are mental health services supporting those who experience these difficulties? Are they providing a telephone service? Are there online video groups the service user can join? What will the service do if they become concerned about a decline in the person’s mental health – who will they contact and at what point (consider safety planning with professionals and family members)?
* How are drug and alcohol services supporting parents using substances? Similar to above, are they offering key work sessions via telephone? What about prescriptions – are they still prescribing these for those recovering from substance misuse? How are they monitoring a person’s usage – testing is obviously not possible at this moment, what other method are they using? If self-reporting, how are they being rigorous to explore this with the parent?
* How are adult care services supporting parents with learning disabilities? Are they helping parents to understand the need for cleanliness and social distancing etc? Do the adults require additional support to help them understand the severity of COVID-19 and who would be best to deliver this work? Is there a community learning disabilities workers involved, if so how can they check in with the family to ensure parents are keeping themselves and their children safe?
* Please also consider the above issues in terms of our Care Leavers; especially those who have children of their own. How are we, as the corporate parent for the Care Leaver, supporting that young person in accessing relevant services where they need them? And are we in contact with those services to explore what they are continuing to offer our young people and advocating for them on their behalf to ensure they continue to receive a service where necessary?

Practice Development Team May 2020