**Practice Guidance for Core Groups**

**Summary**

Core group members must:

* Meet within 10 days of the initial child protection conference
* Meet thereafter at least every 6 weeks
* The final core group before the child protection review to be held up to 15 working days prior to review child protection conference.
* Develop the child protection plan.
* Know what their own roles and responsibilities are for safeguarding the child
* Implement the child protection plan and monitor and track its progress
* Make any necessary additions to the plan if risks to the child increase
* Ensure parents/carers are helped to be fully involved
* Ensure the child’s lived experience, views, wishes and feelings are known and shared

**The Social Worker**

1.1 Where a child is to be the subject of a Child Protection Plan, it is the responsibility of the Conference to consider and make recommendations on how agencies, professionals and the family should work together to ensure that the child will be safeguarded from harm in the future. This should enable both professionals and the family to understand exactly what is expected of them and what they can expect of others.

Specific tasks include:

* A named Lead Social Worker must be appointed by the Child Protection Conference or immediately thereafter for each child who is the subject of a Child Protection Plan. Where more than one child in a family or household has a Child Protection Plan, a separate Lead Social Worker may be appointed for one or more of the children according to the circumstances of the case. In most cases it will be best to appoint a single Lead Social Worker.
* The Social Worker will not be the only professional to have contact with the family, or even be the person who sees them most often. The Child Protection Plan is a multi-agency plan. Each professional will continue to have their respective responsibilities for Child Protection in addition to the task designated in the plan. In addition, the Lead Social Worker has specific responsibilities as set out below.

1.2 The Lead Social Worker is responsible for:

* Convening regular Core Group Meetings. The frequency of these meetings may be recommended by the Child Protection Conference;
* Implementing the Child Protection Plan;
* Developing the Child Protection Plan into a co-ordinated inter-agency plan, which is reviewed against objectives regarding progress made on its implementation;
* Submitting the Child Protection Plan and report to the Conference Chair before each review Child Protection Conference regarding progress made on implementing the plan;
* Maintaining regular and frequent visits to each child and their family / carers. With the exception of pre-lingual children who will be seen, each child in the household must be seen and spoken to alone on each occasion, using the child's preferred method of communication. This will occur unless recommended otherwise by the Child Protection Conference and recorded on the Conference minutes;
* Alerting their managers to any difficulties that are experienced in seeing and speaking alone to a child and agreeing the action necessary to resolve those difficulties;
* Co-ordinating the contributions of family members to required activities and ensuring that the parents know and understand how the need for a Child Protection Plan can be reduced;
* To actively keep up to date with the case and to seek out new and additional information. This will require the reading of case files and updating chronologies;
* Acting as a lead professional for the inter-agency work, providing a focus and a contact for information about the child/ren, keeping those involved up to date with new and additional information and informing those who become newly involved about the Child Protection Plan (e.g. new school);
* Completing the assessment of the child and family with contributions from the Core Group and others and undertaking any other assessment work recommended by the Conference;
* Being involved in any further enquiries about the alleged or suspected abuse of any member of that child's previous and current households and extended family.

**2.**  **The Core Group**

2.1 The Child Protection Conference Chair, in partnership with the Child Protection Conference, will agree the membership of a Core Group consisting of the child, parent/carers, others with parental responsibility and professionals drawn from relevant involved agencies.

2.2 "Membership of the Core Group should include the Lead Social Worker, who leads the Core Group, the child if appropriate, family members and professionals or foster carers who have direct contact with the family. Although the Lead Social Worker has the lead responsibility for the formulation and implementation of the Child Protection Plan, all members of the Core Group are jointly responsible for carrying out these tasks, refining the plan as needed, and monitoring progress against the planned outcomes set out in the plan. Agencies should ensure that members of the core group undertake their roles and responsibilities effectively in accordance with the agreed Child Protection Plan." *(Working Together to Safeguard Children 2010, paragraph 5.116)* (now archived).

2.3 Professional Core Group members are appointed by name and should not be varied without the agreement of the Conference Chair.

2.4 The work of the Core Group will address the risks in meeting the needs of the child and the capacity of the parents to protect and promote his/her welfare. It will focus on developing any existing strengths that the family are able to demonstrate.

2.5 The function of the Core Group is to:

* Bring together all persons who are responsible for making and implementing the Child Protection Plan;
* Develop the Child Protection Plan at the first meeting;
* Decide at its first meeting who will need to do what to complete the Child and Family Assessment on time;
* Be jointly responsible for developing the Child Protection Plan as a detailed working tool;
* Jointly monitor and report progress on implementing the Plan and / or any contingency plan to the next Child Protection Review Conference;
* Allocate tasks identified in the Child Protection Plan to Core Group members and review their progress as required;
* Maintain a focus on strengths as well as areas that need to be improved in considering the needs and progress of the child and family;
* Meeting as a group no less frequently than six-weekly (or more regularly if the needs of the child warrant it) while the Child Protection Plan is in place;
* Maintain a record of group discussions and decisions;
* Review its membership as and when necessary;
* Recommend to the Conference Chair if the Conference should be reconvened at an earlier date than that already agreed.

2.6 A Core Group Meeting should never assume functions that are the responsibility of a Review Child Protection Conference. Consideration should be given, following consultation with a practice manager or Practice Lead, to convening an earlier Conference if the particular circumstances of the case suggest this would be appropriate. It is also advisable to consult with a Child Protection Adviser / designated professional. It is difficult to be prescriptive about specific criteria that may prompt such an eventuality, but the following are possible pointers:

* A serious level of non-co-operation with the Child Protection Plan and agencies implementing it. (Inter-agency escalation procedures are being developed and will in future be incorporated into this guidance);
* Partial level of parental co-operation with some agencies; the Core Group would need to carefully evaluate whether the protection plan could be effectively delivered in these circumstances. (Inter-agency escalation procedures are being developed and will in future be incorporated into this guidance);
* New knowledge emerging which means that the Child Protection Plan requires review;
* When the level of chronic risk to the child is higher than was initially apparent, reconvening an urgent Child Protection Review Conference is essential. For one-off incidents which place a child at risk of significant harm legal advice would need to be sought in order to give the child immediate protection.

**3.**  **Assessments**

3.1 The Child Protection Conference is convened following a Section 47 enquiry. It will consider the information that has been obtained in the Social Work Assessment about the child's developmental needs and the parents' capacity to meet them in the context of their wider family and environment. If an Assessment has been started but not completed, the Lead Social Worker and the Core Group will continue the assessment and formulate the details of the Child Protection Plan. A completed Assessment will be presented at the first Child Protection Review Conference.

3.2 It may be necessary to commission a specialist assessment (e.g. from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), which it may not be possible to complete within the 42-day period.

3.3 Children from black and minority ethnic groups (and their parents) are likely to have experienced harassment, racial discrimination and institutional racism. Although racism causes Significant Harm it is not, in itself a category of abuse. The experience of racism is likely to affect the responses of the child and family to the assessment and enquiry processes. Failure to consider the effects of racism will undermine efforts to protect children from other forms of abuse. The effects of racism differ for different communities and individuals and should not be assumed to be "uniform".

**4.**  **The Child Protection Plan**

4.1 An outline Child Protection Plan will be agreed by the Child Protection Conference. The Lead Social Worker will draw up a full Child Protection Plan in consultation with the members of the Core Group. Each individual child will have a plan. The aim of the plan is to:

* Safeguard the child (ren) from further harm *by supporting the strengths, addressing the vulnerabilities and risk factors and helping meet the child's unmet needs;*
* Promote the child's health and development;
* Support the family and wider members to promote the welfare of the child, provided it is in that child's best interest for them to do so;
* Describe the activities that are necessary to ensure the protection of the child. Any agency that cannot meet its commitment to the plan must inform the Conference Chair.

4.2 The Child Protection Plan should include the following:

* *When and in what situations the child will be seen by the child's Lead Social Worker, both alone and with other family members or caregivers present;*
* A description of the needs of the child and what services are required to help meet them;
* Clear and precise objectives which describes what needs to change to ensure the child's safety and well-being;
* Realistic strategies and specific actions to achieve these objectives;
* A timescale to bring about the required change which identifies the points in time at which progress will be reviewed;
* Who will do what to achieve the plan, including professionals and family members?
* A note of the resources required to achieve the plan and who is responsible for securing the authorisation for their use;
* Specification of the agreed frequency of contact between the family and the agencies involved and the roles and responsibilities of the professionals who have routine contact with the child;
* Measures by which the success of the plan will be judged;
* Contingency plans;
* The names and contact details for the Lead Social Worker and Core Group members and who should be contacted in their absence.

4.3 Each Core Group member (including the parents/carers and if appropriate the child) should be given their own copy of the Plan. It is good practice to produce a written agreement as part of, or in addition to the plan, which is negotiated between the child, the family and professionals regarding the implementation of the plan.

4.4 "The Plan should take into account the wishes and feelings of the child, and the views of the parents, insofar as they are consistent with the child's welfare. The Lead Social Worker should make every effort to ensure that the child and parents have a clear understanding of the planned outcomes; that they accept the plan and are willing to work to it. If the parents are not willing to co-operate in the implementation of the plan the local authority should consider what action, including the initiation of family proceedings, it should take to safeguard the child's welfare*. (Working Together to Safeguard Children, paragraph 5.124*) (now archived).

If family members' preferences are not accepted about how best to safeguard the child, the reasons for this should be explained. Families should be told about their right to complain and make representation and how to do so*". (Working Together to Safeguard Children, 2010 paragraph 5.1253*) (now archived).

**5.**  **Frequency of Meetings**

5.1 The first Core Group will be arranged at the end of the Child Protection Conference; all participates are requested to bring their diaries to Conference to facilitate the first Core Group Meeting to be arranged: The first Core Group will be held no later than 10 working days following the Conference.

5.2 To allow Core Group members to effectively plan their attendance the Chair of the Core Group should agree future meeting dates up to the next Child protection Conference.

5.3 The first meeting of the Core Group will agree a Chair and a Vice Chair.

5.4 The Core Group will subsequently meet on a six-weekly basis, or more frequently if it has been so decided.

5.5 In the event that a child subject to a Child Protection Plan should move school, a Core Group should be held at the new school within 10 working days.

**6.**  **Risk**

6.1 The Child Protection Plan should clearly spell out the element of risk and state how the Core Group intends to manage the assessed risk. When circumstances such as absence of staff and school holidays affect the execution of the Child Protection Plan the Core Group should consider how the risk will be managed.

6.2 School attendance is a crucial factor in managing risk of school-aged children. If a child who is subject to a Child Protection Plan becomes at risk of being excluded, the school should immediately notify the Core Group of this information. The Core Group should consider and record how they intend to manage the risk if the child becomes excluded from education.

**7.**  **Venue for Meetings**

7.1 The venue is subject to reasonable negotiation. The accessibility, comfort and confidentiality of the venue for parents and carers are important considerations.

**8.** **Chairing of Meetings**

8.1 The first Core Group Meeting must be chaired by the Lead Social Worker's Practice Lead.

8.2 The Lead Social Worker will usually chair subsequent meetings. It is recognised that contributing to and keeping minutes of a meeting can be difficult for the Lead Social Worker. The Core Group will ensure the aforementioned tasks are shared amongst the professionals in the Core Group.

**9.** **Attendance at Meetings**

9.1 Attendance should be restricted to the family members, and those professionals actively engaged in implementing the Child Protection Plan. Where a family member's presence would prevent the Core Group from functioning, consideration may be given to excluding the individual. The Lead Social Worker's Practice Lead will make this decision.

9.2 The Conference will designate who will be members of the Core Group. If the allocated professional cannot attend the Core Group Meeting they must ensure their line manager is informed. The line manager will endeavour to provide cover; if this is not possible a written report must be provided to the Core Group Meeting.

9.3 The Lead Social Worker or a representative must always attend the Core Group.

9.4 Every effort should be made to achieve the attendance of relevant family members at the Core Group Meetings. An interpreter must be invited if needed. Where applicable cultural advisers or representatives should be invited to support the parents. The Core Group is an essential working meeting and the parents'/carers' participation is necessary. Small meetings will be less overwhelming and intimidating for parents. Practical assistance around childcare and transport to facilitate their attendance should be encouraged where appropriate. It is reasonable for parents/carers to be accompanied by a friend or relative if they wish. It is an important task of the Core Group to encourage and welcome the parent/carer to the group to ensure they participate and contribute fully.

9.5 The absence of family members from the Core Group Meetings is unfortunate, but their non-attendance should not prevent the group from developing and implementing the Child Protection Plan. The effectiveness of the Core Group will be diminished, but the prime consideration is the welfare of the child/ren.

9.6 Advice should be sought from Child Protection advisers where there is non-co-operation or superficial compliance. In some cases this may also result in the seeking of legal advice and orders being applied for.

9.7 The child/young person should be encouraged to attend the Core Group, where it is felt the child is able to understand the purpose of the group.

9.8 Where there is conflict between agencies, the advice of the Child Protection Conference Chair should be sought.

9.9 Looked After Children: Occasionally a child who is subject to a Child Protection Plan may also be subject to LAC arrangements. The Social Worker and Core Group should ensure that they are aware of the requirements of the child's looked after Care Plan and use this information in developing his/her Child Protection Plan. If another social worker is responsible for the child's Care Plan, that social worker must be invited to the child protection meetings. It is possible that a young child's parent(s) may him/herself be subject to child protection arrangements or a LAC Care Plan. It is expected that the parent(s) social workers will attend the Child Protection Conferences and subsequent Core Group meetings. The Core Groups should carefully consider risk factor for all children, potential areas of conflict including confidentiality issues.

9.10 Mental Health: not all clients will be subject to a Care Programme Approach (CPA), however, current guidelines describe indicators when a Care Programme Approach may be required-one of these guidelines is that there are Child Protection concerns.

9.11 If a child/adult with known mental health issues are not subject to CPA the Mental Health Lead Professional should revisit this decision when a child becomes subject to a Section 47 Enquiry/Child Protection Plan.

9.12 Mental health care plans should clearly identify what support service users require and those requirements should be incorporated into Child Protections Plans. The child's Core Groups should be invited to CPA reviews meetings. If the mental health service user does not agree with this, decisions should be made bearing the child's best interest in mind. The Core Group should receive a written copy of the mental health care plan.

9.13 If mental health service users move to another address the child's social worker must be informed immediately in writing. A formal handover must take place between mental health professionals and the Core Group.

9.14 If a Care Programme Approach is to be discontinued on a child or a child's parent the Core Groups should immediately be notified in writing. The Core Group must immediately consider the impact on the child and update the Child Protection Plan to reflect the risk.

9.15 The lead responsibility for child protection cases reside with the child's Lead Social Worker. The Care Programme Approach should work in close partnership with the child's lead professional.

9.16 Engagement difficulties: contingency, crisis and risk management plans should always be considered and clearly recorded as part of Care Programme Approach and Child Protection Plans, including the need to notify the police/EDT.

**10.**  **Agenda for the Core Group**

10.1 The agenda of the first Core Group, following the Conference, is to develop the Child Protection Plan and plan completion of the Assessment. A written agreement will also be drawn up. The Core Group thereafter will monitor progress of the Child Protection Plan and ensure the Assessment is written within timescales.

10.2 The first Core Group Meeting will also allocate tasks to be completed, within set timescales. Each agency will undertake their part of the Assessment ensuring that the Lead Social Worker has all information in order to compile the Assessment.

**11.**  **Recording of Core Group Meetings**

11.1 It is the task of the Core Group to record the main discussion and decision points of the meeting on the Azeus, the CYPS ICT system. The Lead Social Worker will be responsible for the distribution of the updated plan/minutes.

11.2 The recording should be distributed to all parties involved in the Child Protection Plan, within seven days.

**12.**  **Other Meetings**

12.1 The Lead Social Worker should inform Core Group members of the content and outcomes of other meetings held regarding the child/ren such as looked after children reviews. Such meetings could inform the content and outcomes of Core Group Meetings despite their different purpose and focus.

**13.** **Professional Conflict Resolution**

13.1 In addition, representations and complaints may be received by individual's agencies in respect of services provided (or not provided) as a consequence of assessments and conferences, including those set out in Child Protection Plans. Such concerns should be responded to by the relevant agency in accordance with its own processes for responding to such matters.

13.2 All agencies are responsible for ensuring that their members of staff are competent and supported to escalate appropriately intra-agency and inter-agency concerns and disagreements about a child's wellbeing.

13.3 Concern or disagreement may arise over another professional's decisions, actions or lack of actions in relation to a referral, an assessment or an enquiry.

13.4 Professionals should attempt to resolve differences through discussion and/or meeting within a working week or a timescale that protects the child from harm (whichever is less).

13.5 If the professionals are unable to resolve differences within the timescale, their disagreement must be addressed by more experienced / more senior staff.

13.6 Most day-to-day inter-agency differences of opinion will require a LA children's social care Practice Lead, Police Detective Sergeant, named or designated health professional to liaise with their (first line manager) equivalent in the relevant agencies, namely

* *A police detective sergeant;*
* *A named or designated health professional;*
* *Designated Teacher.*

13.7 These first line managers should seek advice from their agency's nominated / designated child protection adviser if required.

13.8 If agreement cannot be reached following discussions between the above first line managers within a further working week or a timescale that protects the child from harm (whichever is less), the issue must be referred without delay through the line management within each respective agency to the equivalent of service manager/detective inspector/head teacher or other designated senior professional.

13.9 The professionals involved in this conflict resolution process must contemporaneously record each intra- and inter-agency discussion they have, approve and date the record and place a copy on the child's file together with any other written communications and information.

**13.10 Dissent regarding the implementation of a Child Protection Plan**

13.11 Concern or disagreement may arise over another professional's decisions, actions or lack of actions in the implementation of the Child Protection Plan, including the timing, quoracy or decision-making of Core Group meetings, progress of the plan or professional practice.

13.12 Professionals should attempt to resolve differences in line with the actions outlined above.

**13.13 Where professional differences remain**

13.14 If professional differences remain unresolved, the matter must be referred to the heads of service for each agency involved.

13.15 In the unlikely event that the issue is not resolved by the steps described above and/or the discussions raise significant policy issues, Heads of Service should refer the matter urgently to the Newham Safeguarding Children Partnership for resolution.