

Dorset Multi-Agency Procedure for Resolution of Professional Differences - including through making escalations - in respect of work with children and families.

VERSION CONTROL

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2.0	Learning from recent CSPRs and learning reviews in Dorset have identified a need for the escalation procedure to be reviewed and updated.	Project and Policy Officer, Dorset Council and PDSCP Business Support Manager (Dorset area)	Pan-Dorset Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business Manager	07/05/2024	May 2025

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1. Introduction and scope of the procedure

Effective partnership working is key to keeping children and young people safe from harm. The Dorset Safeguarding Children's Partnership celebrates the outstanding safeguarding work completed by practitioners across services and encourages constructive challenge as part of our culture of learning and vigilance.

The first part of this procedure sets out how professionals can recognise good work undertaken by their multi-agency colleagues.

The second part of this procedure sets out the expectations and pathways for managing differences of professional opinions in the child's best interest. Its focus is therefore on resolution, rather than investigation or adjudication.

The procedure can be used between any agencies working to safeguard children within the Dorset Council area. It promotes emergency action when needed but allows time for reflection and opportunities for discussion and review in non-urgent situations.

This procedure can be used for situations that involve one child or group of related children, or it can be used where there is more of a thematic issue that has been raised relating to a number of children and young people. For example, an issue may be raised in relation to a particular agencies' model of delivery/service that is impacting on the safeguarding of children or young people. If it is in relation to a thematic issue (i.e. relating to a number of children/issues identified with the service delivery of an agency), these concerns should be **raised at stage 3** of the procedure straight away. It may be that senior leaders across the Partnership identify strategic safeguarding concerns which they can raise directly at **stage 4** of the procedure.

Some good practice examples have been added at Appendix Two to help professionals to identify when and how they may use this procedure.

This procedure should **not** be used where there are concerns about a professional's suitability to work with children; these concerns should be notified to the Local Authority's Designated Officer (or LADO). Where there are concerns of malpractice or fraud by an individual or organisation, the person concerned should use the relevant authority's Whistleblowing procedure.

2. Compliments

It is also important to recognise and celebrate, in our strengths-based way of working across the Partnership, the great work that is achieved by multi-agency professionals on a daily basis working with our children, young people, and families to ensure that they are kept safe.

It may be that from challenging a colleague from a different agency or organisation to you resulted in an effective decision being made for the safety and wellbeing of the child(ren) involved, and you would like to recognise this. It may be that you would simply like to recognise the good work of a fellow colleague working in a partner organisation.

If you would like to provide a compliment about a fellow colleague who works within a different agency or organisation to you, please submit this via the [escalation/compliment form](#).

3. Principles of professional resolution, including challenge and escalation.

The Dorset Safeguarding Children's Partnership promotes inter-agency working in the interests of the child through both high support and high challenge. Only where there is both effective collaboration and a readiness to offer and consider alternative views and perspectives can children be kept safe. The Dorset Safeguarding Children's Partnership recognises that there can be differences between professionals that require resolution, and appropriate challenge and escalation, where required, is a healthy part of the safeguarding process.

The [Pan-Dorset Multi-Agency Safeguarding Policies and Procedures Manual](#) provides detailed guidance for safeguarding practice, and will be a key resource in the resolution of any professional challenges.

The experience of the child is at the heart of our work and resolving professional differences through challenge and escalation, where required, can help to re-focus decisions around what the child is telling us, what is observed, and what safeguarding actions are therefore required.

Different agencies have specialisms and ways of working which will not always be understood by all partners. All agencies should be curious and open to explaining their decision making, actions and ways of working. This will allow partners to understand if they have a legitimate challenge to make, or if they have not previously fully understood the rationale for another agency's approach.

All differences should be resolved in a timely manner so that the welfare of the child is always upheld. This procedure sets out timescales for professional challenge and escalation as a guide, but in some situations, it may be necessary to instigate all the stages within a short period of time so that the safety of the child is not compromised.

4. Standard practice of professional challenge

Most disagreements and misunderstandings can be resolved through discussion, exploration, and negotiation. The team working with the child should have a culture of sharing information, reasons for decisions and actions, and joint working approaches. This is standard practice; challenge should always be evident between professionals working together. Listening to the professionals who know the children well is key to being able to understand what is in their best interest, even where these professionals bring perspectives that appear to conflict.

Practitioners should have permission, support, and encouragement from their supervisor and/or manager to make constructive challenge when they judge this is in the interests of the child.

It may be helpful to invite multi-agency colleagues to a professionals' meeting to review the matter in question. If it becomes apparent that it cannot be resolved in this way (or through other standard practice routes), the professional concerned should make their own line manager aware. The professional and their line manager will decide whether this should be raised as a Stage Two professional challenge discussion and record their decision and rationale in the case notes for the child. The date of this decision is Day One (all timescales refer to working days).

5. Stage One Professional Challenge – Line Managers

Where one or more professionals are concerned about a decision that has been made, the progress of agreed plans, resource, or capacity issues, and they have been unable to resolve these differences through the standard practice of challenge as set out in section 3 above, they should raise the matter with their line manager.

The line manager will discuss and seek to resolve the matter with the line manager of the other party involved.

The discussion and resolution (if agreed) should be recorded by the managers in the relevant case files, where it is appropriate to do so. If the matter relates to a thematic/systemic issue, then it may not be appropriate/applicable to record this on the child's file. Please consult your line manager if you are unsure.

This should be completed within **three working days of the matter being raised with the line manager.**

6. Stage Two Professional Challenge – Second tier managers

Where the line managers are unable to agree a resolution at Stage One, they should raise the matter to the relevant second tier managers (for example, the Service Manager).

The second-tier managers should review the evidence presented to them and engage their practitioner and line manager to gain a clear picture of the matter. The discussion and resolution (if agreed) should be recorded by the second-tier managers in the relevant case files, where it is appropriate to do so. If the matter relates to a thematic/systemic issue, then it may not be appropriate/applicable to record this on the child's file. Please consult your line manager if you are unsure.

They should resolve the matter wherever possible within **six** working days of the matter first being raised.

Where the second-tier managers cannot reach a resolution within this timescale, they should escalate it to Stage Three.

7. Stage Three Escalation – Heads of Service

Heads of Service are responsible for Stage Three escalations and may need to involve practitioners and line managers to ensure clear understanding of the issues and concerns. **For the purpose of this policy, the Service Manager for the Children's Services Front Door in Dorset is considered as a Head of Service.** It is the responsibility of individual agencies to identify the appropriate officer.

All agencies involved in escalations to Stage Three and above must record the details in their agency escalation log **and provide these details to the Dorset Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business Team** via the [escalation/compliments form](#). The Stage 3 escalation lead for each agency is responsible for making this notification.

If the matter relates to a number of children, and is more of a thematic area of concern related to child safeguarding then the Head of Service can still use the [escalation/compliments form](#) to report this. Alternatively, the Head of Service can email pan-dorsetscp@dorsetcouncil.gov.uk with the details of the matter and they will manually record this on a spreadsheet.

It is **not** the role of the Dorset Safeguarding Children's Partnership Business team to resolve the issues; they should be notified of these so they can track any practice or systemic issues, and report these to the Dorset place-based safeguarding arrangements. It is a statutory requirement for the Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership to report on any escalations raised and discussed across the Partnership.

Every effort should be made to resolve the matter at Stage Three, so that the safeguarding of the child is not impacted in any way. In some cases, there will need to be a note made that disagreement to the plan remains. The senior manager leading the process should ensure that any decisions made at Stage Three are recorded in the child's case file, where it is appropriate to do

so. If the matter relates to a thematic/systemic issue, then it may not be appropriate/applicable to record this on the child's file.

The Heads of Service leading the Stage Three process should also ensure that any organisational or systemic issues that lie behind the escalation are identified, and a plan for resolving these is adopted (see section 9 below).

Stage Three must be completed within **9** working days of the matter being initially raised.

8. Stage Four Escalation: Senior Leaders

In the unlikely event that the professional disagreement remains despite a decision being reached, the issues raised will be referred to the relevant senior leaders of any agency involved so that they can note significant challenges to working together to safeguard children (see also section 9). For the statutory safeguarding partner agencies within the Dorset Safeguarding Children's Partnership, these leaders are:

- Corporate Director Quality Assurance and Safeguarding Families Together (Dorset Council)
- Detective Superintendent, Safeguarding (Dorset Police)
- Head of Safeguarding (NHS Dorset)

Stage Four must be completed **within twelve working days of the original matter being raised**. Details should be recorded on the relevant case files, where it is appropriate to do so. If the matter relates to a thematic/systemic issue, then it may not be appropriate/applicable to record this on the child's file.

A further notification should be sent to the Dorset Safeguarding Children's Partnership by the agency's Stage 4 escalation lead using the [escalation/compliments form](#).

9. Recording the escalation and resolution

Any decision made in respect of escalation should be fed back immediately to the relevant practitioners by those involved, and the detail of the challenge and agreements reached should be recorded on the child's file where it is appropriate to do so. If the matter relates to a thematic/systemic issue, then it may not be appropriate/applicable to record this on the child's file. Please consult your line manager if you are unsure. In those cases where it is inappropriate for records to be held on a child's file, details of the escalation will still be retained by the Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership Business team and the learning will be reviewed within the Partnership.

10. Learning lessons

Most escalations will highlight joint working issues, misunderstandings, competing priorities, resource, or capacity issues. It is important that reasons for escalations and their resolutions are logged and collated within organisations as indicators of practice/ procedure or system issues. The logs should be reviewed regularly by each agency owner, so that remaining concerns and learning can be shared with colleagues.

Each month, the Dorset Safeguarding Children's Partnership will send out an [escalation/compliments form](#) asking partners for details of all escalations to Stage Three and above occurring in the previous month. The data gathered will be reported to the place-based child safeguarding arrangements to review it and identify any improvement actions required.

Appendix One - Potential areas of disagreement

Below is a non-exhaustive list of the types of concerns that may require escalation:

- The response to a situation by any agency which is not perceived to be in the child's best interest.
- A plan for a child at any level on the continuum of need which is not making the progress anticipated.
- There is not a shared understanding of why an agency has made a particular decision.
- A referral not considered to meet the threshold for assessment by Children's social care.
- There is disagreement as to whether the child protection procedures should be invoked.
- There is a disagreement over the sharing of information and/or provision of services.
- There is disagreement over the outcome of any assessment and whether the appropriate action plan is in place to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child.
- Themes have been identified in relation to the safeguarding of children that require strategic oversight. For example, it may have been identified that young people are frequenting a certain area in the community that poses risks to children and appropriate safeguarding action is not being taken to address those concerns.
- Thematic issues may have been identified around a particular agencies' model of service/delivery that is impacting on the safeguarding of children and young people.

Appendix Two - Scenarios and sample wording for escalations

Scenarios

1. A practitioner has sent a referral form to Children's Social Care (CSC) Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) with concerns about a family. The response from CSC MASH is that the concerns do not reach Level 4 in the continuum of need and that the practitioner should undertake an early help assessment and bring together the others working with the child and family to hold a Team Around the Family meeting. The practitioner's line manager escalates this to the CSC MASH manager, and they have a discussion looking at the continuum of need document and seeing that there are elements of Level 4 need, but the CSC MASH manager is able to explain that at present services do not know if the family can recognise and address these needs with services and input at Level 3. The practitioner's manager accepts the advice and understands better the reason for the decision.
2. A child in need case has a plan which is addressing some areas of risk, and the child is known to be suffering a level of harm. There is a sense that the family are trying to change, but there is the potential that this is disguised compliance. There have been regular planning meetings, but in supervision one of the partner's line managers is unhappy that the case has not been considered at a strategy discussion to have a multi-agency view on whether the concerns indicate s47 enquiries should be undertaken. There is a discussion between the managers of the partner agency and CSC. The CSC manager explains that reason for not previously convening a strategy discussion is that the team around the family have been working together for three months and that it is felt that information has been gathered and is known by everyone. However, it is agreed that a formal strategy discussion will be convened for the agencies to look at the cumulative information together and consider whether there should be s47 enquiries.
3. A practitioner is concerned that a child with a child in need plan is not making progress expected and that the plan is not addressing needs. The practitioner's safeguarding lead contacts the CSC manager and has a discussion about these concerns. They review the plan together and agree that there need to be some clearer timescales set for some of the objectives. The practitioner is able to contribute with an additional outcome expected for the child by a certain time and the work they will undertake to support this improvement. The plan is enhanced, and all agencies are clearer about when there will need to be a change of approach because goals have not been achieved.
4. A practitioner is concerned that they hear from a parent that the commitment made by another agency to visit and undertake direct work with the child has not been happening. There is an initial discussion between practitioners, but this does not resolve the concern and there is risk that progress in improving the child's situation is not happening at the pace expected. The practitioner

discusses with their line manager who shares the concern and escalates this to the manager in the other service. There is an email exchange between the managers and input improves once the role and purpose of visiting is discussed in supervision by the manager and worker.

5. An adult service agrees actions with a parent that has potential to impact on their child's welfare. The children's services manager confirms that front-line practitioners have discussed and not been able to resolve the situation and then raises an escalation with the adult service manager. This escalation outlines the challenges faced in the multi-agency work with parent and child. The managers discuss the concerns and recognise that the adult services have not been fully involved in the children services planning and so had not seen the links. There is an agreement that the team around the family is widened to include adult services. Both managers agree to review their systems to ensure this practice is embedded.
6. There is a disagreement at child protection conference that the plan is going to create enough change for the child. A partner line manager escalates the concern to the CSC manager, and they review the plan together. They cannot agree and so both liaise with their senior managers who again review the plan and discuss the case. They cannot reach agreement, but have gained an understanding of each other's position, which is recorded on the child's record. The plan continues with agreement for more frequent core groups to check progress which will be reported to both senior managers. As the escalation process is complete without reaching agreement, service leads are copied into the records so that they can consider joint working arrangements.
7. The timescales for completion of an initial health assessment for a child in care have not been adhered to. The CSC manager raises this with the Children in Care Health team. The Children in Care Health team are able to advise when the next available appointment is for the child to attend an initial health assessment.

Wording that could be used:

8. I made a referral last week and understand that there was a decision not to progress with a Level 4 assessment. Please can we discuss as I need to understand that the concerns have been fully understood?
9. I am concerned that the work agreed in our joint plan has not progressed. I understand that there have been pressures in workloads, but I need to understand what can be done for the family which will achieve the goals we set out.
10. I am worried that the behaviours that are being observed in our setting are not being given the weight they deserve by the practitioner drawing together the

assessment. How can we work together to ensure that what this child is trying to tell us through different behaviours is understood?

11. I am making this request under Stage 2 of our Escalation Procedure. I am responsible for raising this as there is a concern that we are not being effective as a multi-agency group in helping this family create improvements.

