

**Core Group Meetings**

**Practice Guidance for Child and Family Practitioners and Multi-Agency Professionals**

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**Introduction**

This document offers good practice guidance around holding and recording Core Group Meetings, and is aimed at both Child and Family Practitioners and multi-agency professionals. The document is separated in to two parts, the first part being Practice Guidance for Child and Family Practitioners, and the second part being Practice Guidance for Multi Agency Professionals.

The aim of the guidance is to set out what a Core Group Meeting is, timescales, best practice in terms of holding and recording Core Group Meetings, and to advise professionals of their responsibilities as a Core Group member. The overall purpose is to support practitioners in their roles within Core Groups, and to promote effective collaboration between professionals and families to improve the quality of practice, and to safeguard the welfare of children and young people.

The guidance has been developed using the Knowledge and Skills Statement for Child and Family Practitioners (Department for Education, 2018), national research, and the West Midlands Regional Safeguarding Procedures (WMRSP), as adopted by the Dudley Safeguarding People Partnership Board (DSPPB) and Dudley’s Centre for Professional Practice (CPP).

**Part 1**

**Core Group Meetings**

**Practice Guidance for Child and Family Practitioners**

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**What is a Core Group?**

The Core Group is essentially the central mechanism responsible for the development, implementation, and review of the outline Child Protection Plan. It involves the group of family members and professionals involved with the child working together to progress the Child Protection Plan, assess risk, support parenting capacity, and improve the child’s situation. Calder (1995) described the Core Group as ‘the engine room’ for the progression of Child Protection Plans, and Morrison (1995) referred to the Core Group as the ‘catalyst for change’. With this in mind, the agenda item for Core Group meetings should always be the Plan and bringing it to life.

The Core Group take joint responsibility for carrying out the agreed tasks set out in the Child Protection Plan, monitoring and evaluating progress against specified outcomes, and refining the plan as needed. Core Groups should adopt a multi-agency approach to protection planning, with clear inter-professional co-ordination and communication, and this should be implemented in partnership with children and parents. Effective Core Group Meetings evidence clear participation and contribution in the compilation and analysis of assessment, including a robust review of risk, and whether change is occurring for the child and their family.

**Membership of a Core Group**

The membership of the Core Group consists of the family and professionals involved with the child. This includes:

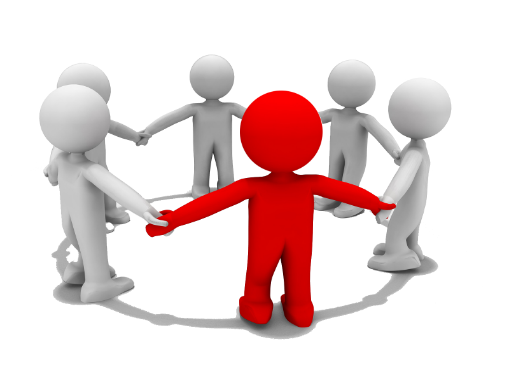
• The ‘Lead Social Worker’ (usually the child’s allocated Social Worker);

• Parents / carers and relevant family members;

• The child/young person (if appropriate);

• Professionals directly involved with the child / parent / carer e.g. Teacher, Health Visitor, School Nurse, Substance Misuse Worker, Mental Health Worker, Domestic Abuse Support Worker etc.

Whilst the Core Group membership will be established at the Initial Child Protection Conference, new members can be added at any time, if this is in the best interests of the child.

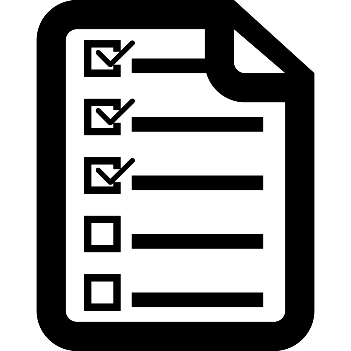
**Leadership of a Core Group**

The Lead Social Worker will be appointed at the Initial Child Protection Conference. As the Lead Professional, it will be their responsibility to convene and chair all Core Group Meetings. In exceptional circumstances where the Lead Social Worker is unable to attend a Core Group Meeting, and it is felt the Core Group should proceed in their absence, another member of the Core Group should chair the meeting.

The Lead Social Worker must ensure that an accurate record of discussion is recorded on the child’s file, and the minutes of this, along with the updated Plan, is distributed to all Core Group members within **2 working days**. The responsibility of minute taking can be shared with fellow professional members of the Core Group, overseen by the Lead Social Worker. In this instance, the minutes should be emailed to the Social Worker within **2 working days**, and the Social Worker should distribute the minutes within **5 working days**. In the event the Social Worker is away from work / off sick, the Chair should contact the Social Work Team’s duty worker and arrange to share the minutes, so the Social Work Team can update the minutes onto the child’s file.

**Core Group Meeting Timescales**

**In Dudley, the first Core Group Meeting will take place immediately after the Initial Child Protection Conference.** Subsequent Core Group Meetings will take place at **4 weekly intervals**, however, Core Group Meetings should always be held more frequently if it is in the best interests of the child to do so.

**Attendance at Core Groups Meetings**

It is expected that Core Group Meetings are consistently attended by all professionals involved. If this is not possible, a report outlining progress made, views about the potential risks faced by the child, and the effectiveness and impact of the plan, should be shared with the Lead Social Worker prior to the meeting. Alternatively, a well briefed representative should attend in the professional’s place.

Every effort should be made to support parents/carers to attend the Core Group Meetings. This may include: -

* Arranging for an interpreter or an advocate to attend meetings;
* Taking into consideration the venue. Is it accessible and does it enable confidentiality?
* Taking into consideration the time of any meetings. Are there any childcare or work commitments we should be mindful of, or religious or cultural factors?
* Arranging any practical assistance regarding transportation to or from the meeting;
* Arranging any practical assistance regarding childcare;
* If parents cannot attend a meeting (e.g. they are subject to bail conditions or live outside of the local area), then their views should be obtained beforehand and shared within the meeting.

The Lead Social Worker should ensure that, where possible, the child/young person is able to attend and contribute to the Core Group Meetings. If the child/young person does not wish to attend all or part of the meeting, then their views, wishes and feelings should be obtained beforehand (e.g. through completion of direct work, letter writing, or via an advocate) and shared within the Core Group Meeting.

**It is important that children and young people are given the right to have their say over what happens, and that these opinions are taking into consideration when decisions are made which affect them.**



**Good Practice for Core Group Meetings and Recording**

***The Initial Core Group Meeting***

One of the main purposes of the initial Core Group Meeting is to further develop and progress a SMART Plan, based upon the Child Protection Plan devised at the Initial Child Protection Conference. The Core Group Meeting gives opportunity for everybody to discuss the plan in more depth and adjust the language used, making it clearer for children/young people and families to understand. It also allows the Core Group to add greater detail to the Plan, e.g. clarification over who will undertake what actions, how these will be completed, and by when.

Whilst adjustments to the Plan are encouraged, no agreed actions or tasks can be removed from the Plan at the Core Group Meeting.

***What Should a Child Protection Plan Include?***

The Knowledge and Skills Statement for Child and Family Practitioners 2018 sets out the need for Child and Family Practitioners to make realistic child centred plans within a review timeline, which will manage and reduce identified risks and meet the needs of the child.

A Child Protection Plan should: -

* Set out the seriousness that different risks present and any harm already suffered by the child.
* Describe the needs of the child/young person, and what services will be required to meet these needs.
* Identify clear and specific objectives which focus on what needs to change in order to reduce risk, ensure the safety and wellbeing of the child/young person, support parenting capacity, and improve quality of care.
* Identify what role each Core Group member has within the Plan, realistic actions to achieve objectives, and clear timescales for all actions to be reviewed or completed by.
* Specify the frequency each professional will have contact with the family in order to complete identified actions.
* Clearly identify how progress against the plan will be measured, and how the impact of the plan will be evaluated to answer the key question, **what difference are we making for this child? Is this child’s situation improving, as a result of intervention?**
* Identify a contingency plan should progress not be made. Apply twin and triple track planning to minimise chances of drift and delay, being alert to the effectiveness or otherwise of current support plans (Knowledge and Skills Statement for Child and Family Practitioners, 2018).

It is crucial that children/young people and parents/carers are fully supported to understand why there is a Child Protection Plan in place, what the identified outcomes are for safeguarding and promoting the wellbeing of the child/young person, and what they specifically need to do to achieve this.

***Subsequent Core Group Meetings***

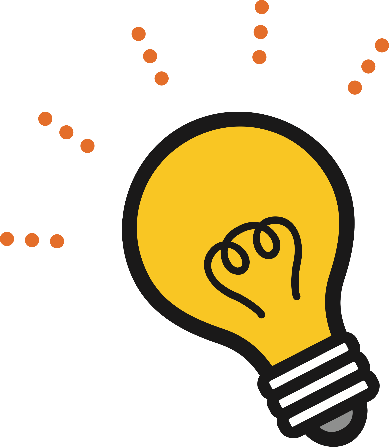
The main focus of subsequent Core Group Meetings is to review the progress of the Child Protection Plan. In order to avoid drift or delay of a Plan, identified timescales for actions and progress made should be closely monitored and reviewed. A key question the Core Group should be asking is “**What difference is this Plan making to the safety and wellbeing of the child/young person?**”. How sustainable is any progress made?

Appropriate and timely steps should be taken in response to increased concerns about the safety of the child, and professional challenge should occur where progress against the plan is lacking. The views of the Core Group in relation to the effectiveness of the plan, and the impact upon the child, should be recorded.

***What Should the Minutes Record?***

There is certain key information that should always be recorded in Core Group Meeting Minutes: -

* The date, time and venue of the meeting.
* The name and designation of those who attended the meeting, and those who sent their apologies or did not attend. If parents / carers did not attend, then the reasons for this should be documented.
* The name of the Chair and minute taker for the meeting.
* **The voice of the child.** Has the child/young person been invited to the meeting? What are their views, wishes and feelings? If they are not in attendance, have their views, wishes and feelings been captured and shared in the Core Group Meeting? What dates have the Core Group members seen the child/young person?
* **The views, wishes and feelings of the parents/carers**. If a parent/carer is unable to attend, have their views been appropriately captured and shared in the Core Group Meeting?
* Reports and updates provided by professional members, along with their views about the effectiveness of the plan, the impact of this upon the level of risk faced by the child, and the impact upon the quality of care received. There should be evidence of clear and specialist information-sharing between family members and professionals, and the continuous evaluation and review of risk.
* A brief summary providing an overview of progress, or lack of it, made against each element of the Plan. Points to consider are:
  + What needs to change for this child/young person?
  + What progress has been made in making these changes?
  + What actions still need to be taken? Who will complete these and by when?
* Any additions or amendments to be made to the Plan. A Child Protection Plan should evolve with the changing circumstances of the child/young person.
* Review and update the contingency plan. If difficulties in progressing the Child Protection Plan are impacting upon the safety and wellbeing of the child/young person, consideration should be given to escalation, potentially bringing forward the date of the Review Child Protection Conference, or taking legal advice.
* Recommendations to subsequent Review Conferences about future plans / continuation of the plan.
* The date, time and venue for the next Core Group Meeting.

**How Can Core Groups Be More Effective?**

Research and audit findings show that Core Groups may not always be as effective and focused as they should be, **so how can we improve?**

* Practitioners need to be clear about the purpose, aims and actions of the Core Group.
* Practitioners must make clear to children/young people and parents/carers what the purpose, aims and actions of the Core Group are.
* Practitioners must ensure that, where possible, they attend all Core Group Meetings. Research and findings from audit highlights a deterioration in inter-agency collaboration and attendance following the Initial Child Protection Conference. A Core Group cannot be effective if key professionals are absent, and this lack of attendance delivers a negative message to children and parents. **Consistency of attendance and contribution to analysis and assessment of the child’s situation is key.**
* Practitioners must ensure they do what they say they will. Research highlights that many parents have felt instances of double standards within the child protection/core group process. Examples of this would be practitioners arriving late to meetings, failing to share reports prior to meetings, or not completing identified tasks – all without any known repercussion. In contrast to this, parents are expected to arrive on time and complete everything asked of them, or face criticism if they don’t.
* **Recognise positive changes, however small.** Setting smaller goals towards change is not only more manageable and realistic, but it will make the child/young person or parent/carer feel a sense of achievement when they’ve reached them. This may form a catalyst to achieve whole outcomes more quickly.

**Dudley’s Centre for Professional Practice have developed an example of a SMART Plan to accompany this guidance. This is to support practitioners to develop SMART, child-focussed and outcome - focussed plans.**



**This guidance is available on the Dudley’s Centre for Professional Practice website:**

[**https://www.dudleycpp.org.uk/**](https://www.dudleycpp.org.uk/)

**Part 2**

**Core Group Meetings**

**Practice Guidance for Multi Agency Professionals**

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**What is the purpose of these guidance notes?**

* The aim of this guidance is to advise you of your responsibilities as a member of a core group. It is based upon West Midlands Regional Safeguarding Procedures (WMRSP) as adopted by Dudley Safeguarding People Partnership Board (DSPPB), and national research.
* The purpose of the guidance is to support practitioners in their role in core groups; to promote effective working together between practitioners and to encourage best practice in promoting children’s welfare and safeguarding them. Research tells us that when core groups work well, the outcomes for children/unborn are more positive. Effective core groups can help safeguard vulnerable children/unborn.

**Why am I a member of the core group?**

* You will have become a member of the core group because you work with the child/unborn and their family and thus have something to contribute in your professional role, it may be that your contribution is small; nevertheless, it will be an important part of the overall protection for a child/unborn. Make sure that you actively contribute, that meetings go ahead even if some people are absent.

**My work is with the adults in the family, why do I need to be in a core group?**

* Your main focus of work may be with the adults in the family as in the case of adult mental health, substance misuse, probation and domestic violence workers for example. You will have an important role in the assessment of parental capacity and parental support needs. You will also have relevant information and a role in working with the family which could be crucial to the protection of the child/unborn. All core group members have specialist knowledge and skills, which contribute towards shared best practice with children and families.

**When and where will the core group meet?**

* In Dudley, the first core group takes place immediately after the Initial Child Protection Conference.
* At the first core group, dates should be set for future meetings up to the date of the first Review Conference. Frequency of the core groups should depend upon the Child Protection Plan and the needs of the child and family. **In Dudley, the recommended frequency is four weekly.**
* Core groups are to continue following the review conference and up to the next arranged conference. Core groups should be held in premises which are comfortable, accessible to all and which allow for privacy. It is vital that parents/carers requirements are put first to ensure attendances and involvement at core group meetings.

**Timescales for agency reports to be submitted.**

* For an Initial Child Protection Conference, parents are to receive the Social Work and agency reports 5 working days prior to the meeting, and the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) 3 working days before the meeting. This is the same for a Review Child Protection Conference.

**What is the first thing I need to do as a core group member?**

* Agree a date, time and venue for the first core group at the end of the initial child/unborn protection conference.
* Share your contact details with the lead Social Worker and other core group members. This should be formalised and recorded at the first core group meeting. Also, ensure the email addresses of the Social Worker, Team Manager and IRO are shared with practitioners.
* Note the date for first review conference as the core group will need to report back on progress with the child/unborn protection plan on that date.
* Inform your line manager that you are now a core group member and that priority will need to be given to attending core group meetings.

**What will happen at the first core group meeting?**

* Initial conference minutes aim to be distributed within 20 working days.
* At this first core group the outline protection plan must be developed into a detailed child/unborn protection plan.
* The WMRSP states that the lead Social Worker should chair the initial core group and would normally be responsible for chairing subsequent meetings thereafter.
* The primary aim of the first core group is to develop the outline protection plan into a detailed child/unborn protection plan and to ensure that all members of the core group have a clear sense of purpose and tasks. In addition to assessment and sharing of information, there also needs to be a focus upon desired outcomes and actions needed to achieve these.
* By the end of the first meeting you should be clear about the tasks you are responsible for and all other core group members, especially the family should also be clear about your tasks and theirs. You should make a record of your own responsibilities to take away from the meeting so that you are able to work on these straight away before the minutes are distributed.
* A copy of the detailed child/unborn protection plan should be sent to all core group members.

**What other responsibilities do I have as a member of a core group?**

* **Attend** - If you cannot attend you should send a representative from your agency or send a written report. You should let the lead Social Worker know if you cannot attend and ensure you get the date of the next meeting. For child/unborn protection planning to work it is vital that all core group members participate fully and demonstrate their commitment to the protection of the child/unborn.
* **Be prepared to Chair the meeting** - If occasion arises when the Chair/lead Social Worker cannot attend/chair a meeting, they/or their manager should inform the core group members as soon as possible. Another member of the core group can stand in to ensure the meeting goes ahead. Meetings should only be cancelled in exceptional circumstances and not as a result of the absence of the Chair/lead Social Worker.
* **Contribute** – The contribution you can make will depend upon the child/unborn protection plan and your level of involvement with the child/unborn and family. Your contribution may be in the form of an assessment, providing information or direct work with the child/unborn and family. You may be the professional with the best knowledge of the child/unborn or the parent. You may have little direct contact with the family but have a monitoring role. If there are difficulties in you being able to contribute to the work of the core group please let the key social worker know.
* **The Child Protection Plan** – All core group members are responsible for the child/unborn protection plan. The plan should include desired outcomes for the child and actions needed to achieve those outcomes; the plan should be SMART i.e.
* **S**pecific clear in its objectives – e.g. to ensure child gains weight appropriately.
* **M**easurable clear, measurable targets – weighing child at set times and keeping a record.
* **A**chievable tasks that family members and other can achieve – weighing at clinic/home.
* **R**ealistic recognising that change may be gradual – offering support to family to achieve tasks.
* **T**imely has to be in timescale for the child e.g. action to be taken if child has not gained weight within a specific time/date.

**What do I have to do in preparation for a review conference?**

* The Chair/lead Social Worker will prepare and write the report for conference. All core group members need to agree what goes into that report in terms of progress made and outstanding areas of work; this will be informed from the core group meetings. A recommendation about continuing with a plan needs to be made by the core group members, not only by the lead Social Worker.
* Following a core group recommendation to step-down and discontinue a child/unborn protection plan it is worth noting that a recommendation can be made at the child/unborn protection conference for specific services to continue to be provided to a child/unborn and their family. This could be universal, or Early Help services to continue to offer support or for services to continue under the Child in Need (CIN) arena.

**How can I ensure the child and family are involved?**

* Involvement is about more than just attending the core group. As a core group member you will have contact with the child/unborn and possibly their family. You will have a responsibility to explain to family members your role in the core group and to consult them about their views. Research says that child protection planning works best when we work in partnership with children and families. This means seeking their views, giving feedback and explaining the process – it is important that parents / carers clearly understand what action is expected from them in delivering the child/unborn protection plan.
* You should consider whether the child attends the core group, if they are not invited consideration must be given to ensure their views can be represented, for example a letter from them or testimony on their behalf.
* It is more likely that parents, carers, children and young people will stay involved if they feel they are being listened to and that their views are given respect, even if agreement is not always possible.

**What if I don’t agree with other core group members or feel that my views are not being acknowledged?**

* The aim of core group is to agree a Child Protection Plan and the action needed to enact that plan. It is healthy for practitioners to professionally challenge each other, in this way generally disagreements can be resolved openly in the core group and a way forward found. If you have concerns about how the core group is working then please let your manager, the Chair/lead Social Worker and the IRO know.

**What do I do if I am concerned that the Child Protection Plan is not working and the child is at increasing risk of harm?**

* You should discuss this directly with the lead Social worker or your line manager and evidence your concern. Aim to reach agreement on the next steps to address your concern. If you cannot reach agreement about a way forward then you need to involve your line manager and contact the IRO to discuss your concerns. Any core group member can request a Conference be convened if they think the Child Protection Plan is not working, or escalate a concerns as detailed in the [**Resolution & Escalation Protocol**](https://safeguarding.dudley.gov.uk/safeguarding/child/work-with-children-young-people/safeguarding-children-procedures/)**.**

**What support can I have as a core group member?**

* Colleagues and other core group members can be a vital source of learning and support for you. You should be supported in this role through supervision and training. Your supervisor needs to be aware of your work as a core group member and of any concerns you have.
* DSPPB offer a range of multi-agency courses /briefings which will incorporate core groups. All practitioners should be maintaining their professional development and using every opportunity to critically reflect on practice.

**Best Practice Tips**

Core Groups enable the pooling of skills and knowledge about a child and family and can be a vehicle for change in a family. The outcomes are likely to be best for the child and family when core groups achieve the following:-

* Clarity of purpose for all members (including parents/carers) – what we are doing, why and how;
* Clear and open communication by all involved (use plain language);
* Collaboration – sharing responsibility and tasks (everyone has a part to play);
* Acknowledge any progress made and what still needs to be done;
* Involving the child and family (by being flexible and imaginative if necessary);
* Valuing the contribution of all involved (ensuring everyone is heard);
* Sharing information in a proportionate way which is in the best interest of the child;
* Ensuring that all members of the Core Group are fully enabled to participate in relation to any additional needs, disability or communication issues;
* Maintain a positive agenda that builds on strengths and solutions rather than difficulties and problems.

**Recording of Core Group Meetings**

* It is the task of the Core Group to record the main discussion and decision points of the meeting on a form designed specifically for this purpose. The chair/lead Social Worker will be responsible for ensuring the distribution of updated plan/minutes.
* The recording should be distributed by the Social Worker to all parties involved in the Protection Plan, within 2 working days.
* In the event another member of the core group chairs the meeting the Chair should email the Social Worker the minutes within 2 working days and the Social Worker should distribute within 5 working days of the meeting.
* In the event the Social Worker is off sick the Chair should contact the social work duty worker and arrange to share the minutes so the Social Work Team can update the minutes onto the child’s file.

**Other Meetings**

* The 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.

***“All members of the Core Group are jointly responsible for formulation and delivery of the Child Protection Plan”.***

**APPENDIX 1**

**ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF CORE GROUP CHAIR & VICE-CHAIR**

A named Core Group Chair and Vice Chair will be appointed by the IRO for all children who are made the subject of a Child Protection Plan.

The Chair must be a qualified registered Social Worker, who holds a recognised social work qualification and is registered with Social Work England (SWE).

The Chair is responsible for coordinating the Child Protection Plan, which is a multi-agency plan. Each professional will continue to have their respective responsibilities for child protection in addition to the tasks designated in the plan.

The Chair has specific responsibilities as follows:-

* 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 at each core group meeting
* Submitting the updated Child Protection Plan and report to the IRO before each Review Child Protection Conference. The new plan and report should highlight progress made on implementing the original plan and outline how the plan has developed through the Core Group.
* Maintaining regular and frequent visits to each child and their family/carers.
* 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 as well as providing a focus and a contact for information about the child/ren. The key worker should keep those involved up to date with new and additional information and inform those who become newly involved about the Child Protection Plan/s (eg new school).
* Completing the Child Young Person’s Assessment of the child and family with contributions from the Core Group and others. Other assessment work may also need to be undertaken as 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.

**APPENDIX 2**

**CORE GROUP MEETING RECORDING TEMPLATE**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **NAME OF CHILD / YOUNG PERSON** | **ABUSE CATEGORY** |
|  |  |
| **DATE OF MEETING** | **LOCATION OF MEETING** |
|  |  |
| **MEETING ATTENDEES** | **APOLOGIES** |
|  |  |
| **MEETING NOTES – MINUTES** | |
|  | |
| **REVISED CHILD PRECTECTION PLAN FOR CHILD** | |
| **Needs, Strengths and Difficulties** | |
|  | |
| **Actions** | |
|  | |
| **Person/Agency responsible** | |
|  | |
| **Target Date for Completion** | |
|  | |
| **Outcome** | |
|  | |
| **Date of Subsequent Meeting** | **Venue** |
|  |  |
| **Chair:** | **Minute Taker:** |
|  |  |

