

Children & Families Directorate

Guidance for Staff

Chronologies



The following guidance sets out the requirements for all staff whose role it is to either complete a chronology or to contribute to one and for managers whose role it is to quality assure this element of practice. Wherever possible reference to our practice framework (**Signs of Safety**) is provided

1 About these guidance notes

In this guide, we explore key characteristics of a chronology that should mean it is:

- seen as important?
- a useful tool in assessment and practice
- not an assessment, but part of assessment
- not an end in itself, rather a working tool which promotes engagement with people who use services.
- accurate and relies on good, up-to-date case recording
- detailed enough but does not substitute for recording in the file
- reviewed and analysed—a chronology which is not reviewed regularly is of limited relevance
- constructed differently according to different applications, for example, current work and examining historical events
- recognising that single-agency and multi-agency chronologies set different demands and expectations.

2 About Chronologies

2.1 Why are chronologies important?

A **Chronology** is important because the exact order in which events occur **helps us understand** the cause and the effect of those events, and thereby **allow us to** step back and view the "big picture" of history - how and why events unfold in the way they **do**, and how they **are** related. They also help to highlight gaps and omitted details that require further exploration, investigation and assessment.

2.2 Why are chronologies useful to practitioners and managers?

In working to improve practice that protects and enhances the lives of vulnerable children, young people and adults, one of the main issues for professionals has been the concept of risk. This guide does not explore the wider aspects of risk assessment in any detail, but it does focus on chronologies - a single important aspect of that process. A chronology is not an assessment, or an end in itself. It is a tool that professionals in a range of disciplines can use to help them understand what is happening in the life of a child or adult.

A chronology is not an assessment, it is informed by, and is part of, an assessment.

“Gathering together large amounts of information is not an assessment. Sharing it does not constitute a child protection plan. Professionals must take the next step to state why they attach significance to some issues and not to others.”

Chronologies are a key part of assessing and managing risk.

Examples of inquiries which have promoted the importance of chronologies

For the most part, inquiries into the circumstances surrounding serious child abuse have drawn attention to the importance of chronologies.

The Jay Report (2014) on child sexual exploitation in Rotherham found that there was a chronology in fewer than half the cases looked at (43%) where it would have been appropriate to have one. Most chronologies were out of date, with significant gaps. Professor Jay concluded that: “...It is likely that the absence of structured chronologies contributed to key information being missed when decisions were made”.

Lord Laming, in his report into the death of Victoria Climbié (2004) was unequivocal in stating: “I regard the inclusion in any case file of a clear, comprehensive and up-to-date chronology as absolutely essential”.

In a youth justice context, the follow-up inspection into the management of Colyn Evans (2009) concluded that: “SWIA did not find comprehensive and up-to-date chronologies in any of the files in the sample. Good risk assessment requires detailed and accurate information. For example, the young person referred to in the previous paragraph had

assaulted staff in a residential unit on several occasions and had a long history of abusive behaviour which could have been identified by an accurate chronology”.

The report into the case of Miss X (2004) looked at the case of a woman with learning disabilities who, along with other adults at risk, was seriously abused over a period of years. It is recommended that any reviews of social work case records of people with learning disabilities should answer a critical question: “Is there a chronology of significant events and are the implications of these events understood?”

3 Developing a chronology

3.1 The chronology as a tool in assessment and practice

Many practitioners ask: “do we need chronologies for every person we are working with?” Here in Redcar and Cleveland we have an expectation that, as a basic requirement, each agency involved with a child and their family will collate key information into a single-agency chronology.

There are five key elements to compiling all chronologies.

Compiling a chronology – Five Key Elements

- Deciding on the purpose of compiling a chronology in the context of the assessment of the child or adult – using professional judgment.
- Identifying the key events to be recorded.
- Making sure that what is recorded is accurate and in date order.
- Recording facts, significant events in the person’s life.
- Taking account of the perspective of the child or adult at the centre, that is, understanding the significance of events for them – what was the impact positive or negative.

There are questions surrounding what to include in a chronology and we discuss this in detail later, but as a starter, core elements are set out here.

Core elements of a chronology

- It is evidence based (not opinions) these may be for the case record, but the strength of chronologies lies in their reporting of facts, times, dates and so on.
- It is written using clear language (not professional jargon)
- It provides key dates such as dates of birth, life events (e.g. separation, loss, marriage), moves.
- Facts, such as a child made subject to a Child Protection Plan, multi-agency public protection arrangements (MAPPA) meeting,
- Transitions, life changes.
- Key professional interventions such as reviews, hearings, tribunals, court disposals.
- It provides details of the person someone is worried about and the evidence of his/her harmful/damaging behaviours that people have seen/heard that make them worried (**Harm**)
- It describes how severe the persons behaviours were (**Harm**)
- It describes the known impact of the harmful/damaging behaviours on the child. (**Harm**)
- The chronology should record what was done at the time in order to try and help with the worries (**Strengths**) and keep the child safe (**Safety**). Many chronologies list events, dates etc. but do not have a column which sets out the action which was taken at the time.

Chronologies have a wider application than risk assessment and management. A chronology can be a valuable tool for planning and supervision. When staff are very busy juggling many different demands, progress in working with a person may drift. Several months can pass without any action and such unacceptable delay is not always easy to identify from a record. A chronology of dates can help to flag up delay and drift.

3.2 Chronology is not an end in itself, but a working tool which promotes engagement with people who use services

Some practitioners tell us that they feel compiling a chronology is an exercise that takes up considerable time but does not lead anywhere – This shows us that they are not seeing the chronology as an essential evidence based component of their analysis

Chronologies are a part of recording and should be available to the person they are about, unless there are justifiable reasons to withhold the information because sharing it would increase risks for the person. The chronology should normally be shown to, and discussed with, the person it is about, or their parent, in the case of a young child.

Sharing chronologies and consulting people who use services is important in ensuring accuracy. Mistakes, particularly concerning dates of significant family events (such as dates of birth, dates when families moved home) where small but significant errors in a chronology can then be replicated over and over again in reports. Sharing chronologies can also help in working together and strengthening a sense of achievement and progress. Reviewing a chronology alongside a person who uses services can help to identify where they have succeeded, for example in reducing their drug dependency or improving the school attendance of their child.

A chronology is not simply a way of storing contact data. In our discussion with practitioners, we often find differing views on where key information about a child or adult should be located. Electronic file systems vary but all should have the equivalent of a file front sheet with essential information about contacts, professionals, health staff, and so on. Storing this essential information, however, is not the purpose of the chronology

3.3 A chronology must be based on up-to-date, accurate case recording

The importance of accurate recording has been a key theme in child protection inquiries since the mid-1970s.

One of the first major child protection inquiries into the death of Maria Colwell noted that: “Inaccuracies and deficiencies in the recording of visits and telephone messages played a part in the tragedy... the importance of recording actual dates and distinguishing between fact and impression”.

Other inquiries found that allegations by neighbours were sometimes not recorded fully, were ignored or deemed malicious. All eight child protection inquiries concluded between 1974 and 1981 reported that records were incomplete. Many years later, poor recording was noted in Lord Laming’s inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (2004).

3.4 A chronology should contain sufficient detail but not be a substitute for or duplication of case recording.

Practitioners report that this an area of practice which causes confusion, that chronologies can become repeats of the case recording, and become so detailed workers could not 'see the wood for the trees'.

One reason for this surplus detail has been an attempt, in some areas, to introduce a system-based solution to compiling chronologies, that is, providing the facility to automatically transfer case-record entries into the corresponding chronology. The intention was to make it less time consuming to compile chronologies. However, in a significant number of adult and children's case records we looked at, this had led to the indiscriminate transfer of case-recording entries, resulting in chronologies that were too long and detailed.

Examples but not an exclusive list of significant events which should be included in a chronology the key element is to include why it is significant for the child/young person – both negative and positive impacts:

- Birth of a significant person
- Death of a significant person
- Referrals to Children's Services
- Strategy discussions
- S47 enquiries
- Child Protection conferences
- Court hearings
- Admissions and Discharges to Local Authority Care
- Change in legal status of a child
- House moves
- School moves and schools attended
- School attainment
- Persons moving in and out of the households
- Significant incidents of anti-social behaviour
- Dates of immunisations and vaccinations
- Financial problems / arrears / county court judgements
- Assessment by other agencies e.g. EHCP
- Referrals to other significant agencies
- Changes in education, training and employment
- Criminal proceedings
- Imprisonment of significant person
- Incident of domestic abuse

- Homelessness
- Accidents
- Significant health issues – eg. Teeth decay / extractions/Drug test results/hospital admissions
- Missed appointments e.g. health / hospitals note the impact
- House fire
- New service started eg drug treatment
- MAPPA / MARAC notifications

3.5 The importance of review and analysis

A chronology that is not reviewed regularly is of limited relevance, in order to carry out an effective assessment it is essential to review and analyse the chronology. A chronology which is not reviewed and analysed serves little, if any, purpose.

There is a range of opportunities to review a chronology.

Supervision has a role in reviewing a chronology both in terms of content and quality and providing a space for the practitioner to reflect on significant events for the child and the impact.

Joint inspections of children's services show us that partnerships still have some way to go in ensuring the quality of chronologies produced in case records.

Many of our audits in Redcar & Cleveland show us that the quality of our chronologies need to significantly improve as they do not help the reader to accurately identify patterns of significant events, or help parents, relatives or carers to understand the impact of these events on the individual's wellbeing.

3.6 Different types of chronology are needed for different reasons

So far, we have discussed chronologies that are part of current work with children and adults. However, case reviews and inquiries have all compiled chronologies to help them to make sense of what has happened in the past. These will rely on retrospective information and may mean the records of several agencies need to be brought together into a single chronology. The choice of data may change as a tentative hypothesis is developed and explored.

3.7 Single-agency and multi-agency chronologies set different demands and expectations

A **single-agency chronology** provides a brief description and summarised account of events in date order. It should be used as an analytical tool to assist in the understanding of the impact of life events and to inform decision making. Integration of single-agency chronologies can establish a wider context from the agencies involved with a child or young person.

An **integrated chronology** is produced as part of a specific multi agency intervention and will include only information extracted from single agency chronologies that is relevant and proportionate to support that intervention.

An integrated chronology should therefore be started when there is concern about a person's wellbeing, to support a multi-agency response. Complications can arise between professionals if it is not clear exactly who has responsibility for gathering together single-agency chronologies, combining them into one chronology and updating it regularly. Multi-agency chronologies must also be regularly reviewed, analysed and updated by the lead professional.

The lead professional is responsible for collating the integrated chronology, and all agencies contributing to the integrated assessment are expected to contribute to it. The process will work best when there is a shared sense of responsibility by all for gathering, recording and passing the information to the lead professional.

4 General Rules

Brand New Cases

For all brand new referrals where there is no previous Children's Social Care involvement, it is expected that all staff will commence a new chronology on Protocol for each child in the family.

New referrals with previous history of involvement

For all new referrals where there has been previous Children' Social Care involvement, the standard of the previous chronology will be considered and the team manager will make a decision as to whether a new chronology is required. If it is, then the old chronology will be archived and a new one started. However, it is expected that the social

worker considers any existing chronology on file, picks out the salient key points and inserts them into the chronology.

Current open cases

There will be a deferment on current cases, which means that if the existing chronology is not to the required standard, it will be archived. As a minimum expectation, decided by the team manager, there will be an up to date, detailed summary completed. This will be inserted as the first significant event within the new chronology, which will be maintained and updated on a regular basis thereafter.

5 Quality Assurance

Team managers will be responsible for specifically addressing the issue of the Chronology during supervision. Case file auditors will also be responsible for monitoring the Chronology as part of the auditing process. The auditor will be responsible for proactively following up any identified deficits subsequently. Where the outstanding tasks regarding the Chronology remains incomplete within the specified timescale the relevant team manager/service manager will be alerted for action.

6 Protocol Guidance for Chronologies

How to archive an existing chronology

Before archiving an old chronology, if there are any relevant entries that you would wish to include in the new chronology, it is possible to convert and save a copy of the existing chronology into a PDF file first, thus allowing you to cut and paste text into any new chronology that is created.

To do this:

- Click on 'Print current Significant Events (Chronology)'
- Click on the small PDF document image (to the right of the 'Print Page now' link)
- Click on 'Save'
- Click on 'Open'
- This will open up a new PDF file which you can save into a location of your choice using the 'Save as' option

To then archive the existing chronology on Protocol:

- At the bottom of the chronology page click on the 'Archive' button next to 'Add current Significant Events (Chronology) to Archive'
- This will bring up a box where you can type in the reason for archiving the old chronology. It is suggested workers add something like 'Old chronology being archived, as per new departmental expectations, to enable new chronology to be started'.
- This will create a new Archive. The archived chronology will remain accessible and readable, should there be any need to access it again in the future. The archived chronology will indicate who actioned the archive and when this was done.

To access an archived chronology at any time, simply:

- Click on the 'retrieve' button at the bottom right of the chronology page
- Click on the archived version of the chronology you wish to access.

There is also an option to restore an archived chronology by clicking on the restore button at the bottom of this page, **however please note that if you choose this option, any new chronology you have started will be overwritten and lost.**

Once you have archived an existing chronology, a copy will still remain on the main page. You can then delete the version on the main chronology page, in order to start a fresh one (this will not affect the archived copy).

To do this:

- Click on 'Clear the current Chronology' button near the bottom left of the page.

The best way to input a new significant event is to input it from scratch

This is easy and allows you to write freely in the field, without the need to pull items through and then amend them, to ensure they are fit for purpose.

To do this:

- Click on 'Add New Significant Events (Chronology) Item'
- This brings up a box which allows you to insert the date, category, type, details and document ref. There is no expectation that all these boxes are completed however, as a minimum, the date and details box should be completed. The details box should contain a heading which highlights the nature of the significant event (eg 'domestic abuse incident', 'house move', 'new relationship started') and contain a short summary of the event. Don't forget to include the outcome of the event!

Chronologies can be exported and saved as a word document, and the court will accept this as part of a social worker's evidence.

To do this:

- Click on 'Export Significant Events (Chronology)'
- On the screen that appears, input the day's date and under 'Type' choose 'Court Document Version of Chronology'
- This will open a page where beneath the heading 'RTF' Generator you will be able to pre-populate the front page of the court document with the date of court hearing, court location, case number and details of applicants and respondents etc.
- Once you have done this click on 'Create Document'
- Then click on 'Download Document'
- This will open up your court chronology word document. As with any word document you can work on it and make amendments, then if you save it afterwards it will automatically be saved under 'Documents', as a draft. This means you can access it from the 'Documents' tab anytime by clicking on 'Download the document' and you can continue to make changes and save those change until you are happy with it.
- Once you are happy with it and it needs no further changes, instead of clicking on 'download the document' you need to click on the actual 'court document' itself on the same screen and this will open up another screen where there is an option to 'Complete the document'. This will finalise it, meaning that no further changes can be made to it.

Social workers are expected to regularly update their chronologies. It is good practice is for chronologies to be updated at least monthly.