

Transfer of Responsibility between Authorities for Children with a Child Protection Plan - West Midlands' Authorities Contingency Position Statement during COVID 19 Pandemic

1. Introduction

The COVID19 pandemic has impacted on all statutory and voluntary agencies working in child protection, meaning that innovative ways of working with families are being developed, including arrangements for Child Protection Conferences. This paper focusses on the arrangements for transfer of cases between authorities following the recent West Midlands' agreement to suspend case transfers until further notice with few exceptions.

It is also recognised that, at this time, authorities will need to be flexible and helpful, working with colleagues from other areas to ensure children continue to be protected. An example might include visiting families for whom virtual contact is not enough and long distances preclude the allocated social worker visiting. These arrangements will continue to be agreed between authorities.

This paper proposes the suspension of Receiving-In Child Protection Conferences across the West Midlands until at least the end of June 2020 and makes provision for exceptions to this arrangement.

2. Usual Case Transfer Arrangements

Children with a Child Protection Plan are among the most vulnerable to significant harm. Formal arrangements are in place for transfer of responsibility for such children between authorities as set out in Working Together 2018 and the West Midlands Regional Safeguarding Procedures. These arrangements ensure that there is always one authority holding case responsibility.

It can take some time to ascertain whether the family's move is permanent. Arrangements are then put in place to share information between authorities, ensure visiting levels are maintained and that partner agencies in both authorities are informed and communicating regarding the support arrangements in place. The case responsibility is formally transferred at the Transfer in Child Protection Conference.

3. Rationale for decision to suspend these arrangements due to Covid-1.

The transfer of case responsibility at Child Protection Conference depends on clear communication and collaboration between all involved partner agencies to ensure that the safeguarding arrangements in place remain robust at all times. The present circumstances, where agencies are working with competing priorities and lowered resources, make that much more difficult. Local Authorities are rightly prioritising urgent S47 assessments and their outcomes.

Conferences, where concerns and solutions are fully discussed, are not taking place. For transfer cases important information could be missed or misunderstood, potentially impacting on child safety. Formal conferences not being held also makes it more difficult to ensure essential support and supervision services to families from all agencies are maintained at the required level.

The effective implementation of Child Protection Plans depends on professionals developing a close working relationship with children and families. Families tell us that having a CP plan is itself stressful. Children need time to develop a relationship with their worker. It would be unfair and potentially unsafe to impose a change of key workers on families at this time.

Social workers and other partners are having to rely on the use of technology to maintain contact with families, with home visits being undertaken only in the most concerning situations. This would make it much more difficult for a receiving social worker to begin to develop their relationship with children and families, as well as with partners.

4. Core Groups and Partner Agencies

The effectiveness of Child Protection Plans is dependent on the core group working together for the child. Transfer without a conference would make the establishment of a new core group difficult. Partners are responsible for continuing their work with the family as they would were the family still resident in their area with the use of technology, visiting etc. In exceptional cases where visits are needed and not feasible due to distance, agencies will need to liaise with colleagues in the new area to assist, whilst recognising every LA will likely have significant staffing reductions to manage.

In these circumstances, it is important that partner agencies who are involved in offering services and interventions either directly to children or parents e.g. in respect of substance misuse, mental health etc, do not close the case or transfer their involvement to another provider, where at all possible.

5. Circumstances where exceptions might apply

There will be anomalous situations where it is necessary for a case transfer to take place between authorities, but this should be on an exceptional basis. This would be where the court has issued care proceedings to the receiving authority or where it is in the child's best interests to transfer the case safely, for example, the transfer was imminent before COVID-19 and relationships had already been established between the family and agencies or where substantial distance makes continuing involvement of core group members very difficult.

When such cases arise, these should be discussed by representatives of both the originating and receiving authorities at Head of Service/Service Manager level to agree transfer or not, and if appropriate a transfer date agreed. The social worker, core group members and family will be promptly informed of the agreed course of action. Exceptional disagreements between senior staff should be escalated to Assistant Director level for resolution.

The social worker in the originating authority will have a telephone conversation with their colleague in the receiving authority ensuring all pertinent information and reports are provided, confirming the case formal transfer date. That social worker will also inform core group members of the transfer and advise them of the need to make referrals to colleagues in the receiving authority.

The social worker in the receiving authority will accept the case with both social workers noting in their files that the transfer has formally taken place. This social worker will then convene the core group and contact the family.

6. Review of these arrangements

These arrangements will be monitored regularly at Assistant Director level and necessary changes made as the current pandemic develops. Any changes will be communicated promptly to key staff accordingly. **These arrangements will be reviewed at the end of June 2020.** When a decision is made to end these contingency arrangements, authorities will revert to previous arrangements in accordance with Working Together guidance (2018).