

Children's Services – Practice Briefing



One Children's Service - Consistently Good Everyday and Onwards to Outstanding.

**Core Group
Practice Briefing
November 2019**

Purpose of this Briefing

Swindon Children's Services are committed to delivering high quality and consistently good services to children, young people and their families in Swindon.

We are developing a series of Practice Briefings on key areas of social work practice to support our continuous improvement journey.

These Briefings will utilise research findings to support practice improvement and improve outcomes for our children, young people and families.

Introduction

The aim of this briefing is to make clear the roles and responsibilities of all Core Group members throughout the period a child has a Child Protection Plan.

It is not intended to replace existing procedures –instead it aims to strengthen and energise current practice in Swindon.

The document sets out the key principles and remit of core groups and the arrangements for convening meetings and the responsibilities of Core Group members.

It seeks to improve practice and includes the use of research to inform practice within Swindon.

It covers the arrangements for holding and attending core group meetings and how Child Protection Plans should be developed in Swindon.

The safety of children who are subject to Child Protection Plans in Swindon is dependent on the commitment of all partner agencies to fulfil their responsibilities with regard to the Child Protection Planning process.

See also: for additional guidance.

Child Protection Plans-Lead Social Worker Role and Responsibilities

https://swindonchildcare.proceduresonline.com/chapters/p_ch_prot_sw_role.html

Purpose of Core Group

The Core Group is the key mechanism for monitoring and implementing the Child Protection Plan outside of the Child Protection Conference.

It is often aptly referred to as the “engine room” of progressing the Child Protection Plan.

The Core Group’s task through the Child Protection Plan is to reduce the risks to the child and safeguard the child’s wellbeing to the point where the child no longer needs a Child Protection Plan.

The Core Group achieves this by:

Producing an agreed, detailed and SMART outcome focused Child Protection Plan which details who should do what by when.

Updating information to inform decisions about the child’s needs, safety and welfare.

Monitoring and evaluating progress against the specific outcomes for the child within their Child Protection Plan and developing new actions when required to achieve the outcomes for the child.

Ensuring there is no drift and delay in achieving the aims of the Child Protection Plan.

Making recommendations to review conferences about future Child Protection Plans with specific outcomes.

Core Group Membership

Membership of the core group will have been identified at the Initial Child Protection Conference, although new members may join if they become directly involved in helping to safeguard the child.

The Initial Child Protection Conference will also identify the lead social worker who will act as the lead professional, coordinating Core Group meetings, ensuring members are communicating well with each other and ensuring the child Protection Plan is effectively implemented.

The Core Group should consist of:

- The child/young person (if appropriate)
- Parents/carer and any other relevant family members
- The lead social worker
- Professionals involved with the child and / or parent; an invite should always be sent to the GP.

Core Groups are an important forum for working with parents, wider family members and children of sufficient age and understanding, Where there are conflicts of interest between family members within the work of the Core Group then the child’s best interests should always take precedence.

Core Group Administration

All Core Group meetings will be minuted –effective administration of Core Groups is ‘key’ to them being undertaken in a timely rigorous and inclusive manner.

Core Group meetings will follow the structure as set out in the agenda – **see Appendix 1**. This format reflects the items that ‘must’ be considered within a Core Group Meeting.

The Core Group minutes should clearly identify the name and designation of all attendees.

It is the ‘lead social worker’s’ responsibility to ensure that minutes of the Core Group Meeting are an ‘accurate record’, that they are distributed to all Core Group members within best practice 5 working days and maximum of 10 working days and that they are clearly recorded on the child’s electronic record .

The minutes should be sent in an electronically secure manner.

Core Group minutes should always be clearly linked to the progress of the Child Protection Plan.

Chairing of Core Groups

It is normal for the first Core Group to be chaired by the Social Care Team Manager or Assistant Team Manager. However subsequent Core Groups may be chaired by Social Care or Multi agency practitioners.

Service Managers may however chair complex core groups if appropriate. In situations where there has been complaints or a relationship breakdown between the family/team then the Principal Social Worker can be approached to chair the Core Group.

First Core Group

The date, time and venue of the first Core Group will be agreed at the Initial Child Protection Conference and must be within 10 working days of it.

The main purpose of first Core Group meeting is to develop the outline ‘Child Protection Plan’ which was drawn up at the Initial Child Protection Conference. In effect, the Initial Child Protection Conference commissions the ‘Core Group’ to develop and implement a ‘SMART Plan’ as a detailed working tool.

The First Core Group is an initial opportunity (where appropriate) to adjust the language so it is clearer or more understandable, identifying specific services or resources, clarifying who will do what, when and how. It is therefore imperative that all agencies ensure a solid commitment to this part of the Child Protection Process.

The Child Protection Plan should include:

- 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 wellbeing.
- 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 first Core Group may adjust and add to the Child Protection Plan – but, may not remove any agreed actions or tasks.

It is essential that the parents/carers (and the child, if a member of the Core Group and attending the meeting) are appropriately supported at this initial meeting. In particular that they are helped to fully understand the 'Reasons' for the Child Protection Plan, the identified 'Outcomes' for the child and the specific actions and indeed 'Expectations' required of them and of others.

The first Core Group is a good forum to question each other, to express difference of opinion and always to conclude by identifying the means by which disagreement can be resolved.

The aim is to feel that we can question each other in order to reach a genuine consensus and joint ownership of the Child Protection Plan. Once the Child Protection Plan has been discussed, all members of the core group – including parents/carers – must sign it, to confirm they have read and understood it.

The dates of subsequent Core Group meetings should be scheduled at the

end of each meeting to ensure all members, including parents and young people, can attend.

Core Group meetings should be given absolute professional priority and should only be cancelled or re-arranged in 'exceptional circumstances.'

The need to be sensitive to the parents' schedules – usually related to child care responsibilities – when setting the time of meetings is also important.

Subsequent Core Groups

Statutory guidance imposes that Core Group meetings should be held at least every 6 weeks. However, frequency should always reflect the levels of risk and of multi-agency co-operation needed to safeguard the child.

In Swindon, it is expected that core group meetings are held at '4 weekly intervals'.

The purpose of subsequent Core Group meetings is to review the implementation of the Child Protection Plan and the progress made towards the identified outcomes for the child. A review Core Group should be concerned with the practical implementation of the Child Protection Plan, refining the plan as needed against the specified objectives. The Child Protection Plan should be made available by the lead Social worker at all subsequent core group meetings.

Each Core Group meeting should monitor the timescales set, to avoid drift or delay and should critically

consider ‘what difference’ the plan is making to the child’s safety and wellbeing

The child’s current experiences, views, wishes & feelings (including about their own wellbeing and safety) should be considered at each core group meeting – ‘the voice of the child’.

Within each Core Group there should be a focus on ‘what life is like for the child’ living in their current home circumstances. The Child’s “lived experience”

Core group members should consider the ‘impact’ the Child Protection Plan is having on the child in improving their ‘outcomes’ and provide ‘evidence’ as to why this is the case.

Direct work undertaken with the child and their wishes and views about their life and future should be shared.

The Core Group may make further adjustments or additions to the Child Protection Plan, to reflect changes in risk, need or circumstances for the child or their family.

The chair of core group prior to a RCPC should be left to management discretion based on the complexity of the case

It is good practice to hold a Core Group meeting 2 weeks before a Review Child Protection Conference. This is to ensure professionals and parents have a clear understanding of what will be shared and what will be recommended to the Review Child Protection Case Conference.

Responsibilities of Core Group Members

Core Groups are multi-agency meetings and therefore the ‘collective responsibility’ of all professional members. All members, including professionals working specifically with parents/ carers or other adults in the child’s family, are reminded that the Core Group must remain child-focussed.

If the Chair of the Core group is sick or otherwise unable to attend, the Social Work team manager should be notified and will take responsibility for ensuring that a sufficiently informed ‘substitute social worker’ attends in their place. Any changes to the time or venue of the core group should be clearly communicated to all parties in advance by the lead social worker.

All members of the Core Group share joint responsibility for developing and implementing the Child Protection Plan (see below), refining it as needed, monitoring progress towards the planned outcomes for the child and making recommendations to subsequent Child Protection Conferences about whether or not the Protection Plan needs to continue.

All core group members are expected to attend every core group meeting. If a professional member is unable to attend a meeting due to exceptional circumstances, they must let the lead social worker know and must provide a written report in advance and/or send a ‘well briefed’ representative.

If there are concerns about poor agency representative, the lead social worker should inform the chair of the previous Child Protection Conference.

Core Group members are responsible for making a note of their respective actions from the Core Group. They should not 'rely' on receiving the record of the meeting to prompt their intervention.

If there are difficulties receiving the record, Core Group members are encouraged to be proactive in contacting the Social Worker to enquire as to the reasons for the delay.

Persistent late production and or absence of core group minutes should be appropriately challenged.

Supporting Participation

Parent / Carer

Swindon Children's Services supports an outcome focused and relationship based approach to working with families. This focuses on developing relationships with an emphasis on a strength based approach in all work with children and their families.

The Core Group should enable the family to be proactively involved in developing the Child Protection Plan for their children. Role of family must be considered to enable the family to be owned by them.

The lead social worker must ensure that parents/carers are appropriately supported and enabled to attend Core Group meetings -for example, by providing an interpreter, signer or advocate, etc. if required.

The time and venue of Core Group meetings should take into account the wishes and needs of the parents/carers (as well as other core group members), including any religious or cultural factors and any work or childcare commitments.

The Core Group should consider parents'/carers' need for childcare and should assist them to identify suitable provision, if required.

In some cases a parent/carer may not be able to attend in person (for example if parent with parental responsibility does not live locally or is subject to bail restrictions. In these circumstances, the lead social worker should obtain their views and wishes in advance and ensure they are shared at the meeting.

In situations of domestic abuse or significant family conflict, the lead social worker must decide how to involve both parents/carers in ways that do not place anyone at risk and does not prevent the meeting remaining focussed on the child's needs.

Child / Young Person

The lead social worker must also ensure the child/young person is able to contribute to Core Group meetings and that their current views and wishes are clearly shared. This may involve the child or young person attending the meeting (or part of it) in person, by them sending a letter, drawing or recording, or by an advocate attending on their behalf.

Children and young people may need help to understand why any significant changes have been made to their protection plans; their views about this should be known to all core group members.

Children and Young People have the right to say what they think should happen when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have their opinions taken into account.

Difficulties in Implementing Child Protection Plan.

When a Child Protection Plan is not progressing, the Core Group must consider the reasons for this e.g. poor professional working, new incidents or information, lack of family engagement.

Where any member of the Core Group is aware of difficulties in implementing the Protection Plan due to any reason, the Lead Worker (or Team Manager in her/his absence) must be informed immediately.

The Core Group member should also discuss the concerns with her/his own agency named/designated professional.

Advice may also be sought from the Child Protection Chair where there is non-co-operation or superficial compliance by the family.

Core Group members should be aware of the 'contingency plan' and this should be explicit and written into the formal Child Protection Plan.

If the difficulty in implementing the Child Protection Plan is impacting on the safety of the child, the Team Manager, named/designated professional for child protection in their own agency must be consulted.

Consideration should be given to the need for immediate legal action or a further Section 47 Enquiry and/or to bring forward the date of the Review Child Protection Conference.

Where any member of the core group is aware of difficulties implementing the protection plan, the lead social worker must be informed immediately

and a core group meeting / discussion coordinated to agree a plan of immediate action.

If required a strategy discussion/meeting should be convened to consider the need for immediate emergency police action to gain access to a premises where appropriate, a Section 47 Enquiry, legal action, and/or to bring forward the date of the review child protection conference. Arranging a legal planning meeting should be considered by the lead social worker with their line manager.

Circumstances about which the lead social worker should be informed include inability to gain access to a child who is subject to a child protection plan, for whatever reasons.

Where there are concerns that a child or family are missing for guidance see Children and Families who go Missing procedure.

https://www.proceduresonline.com/swc/pp/swindon/p_ch_fam_go_missing.htm
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Professional Disagreement

If members are concerned that there are difficulties implementing the protection plan arising from disagreement amongst professional agencies or a core group member not carrying out agreed responsibilities this must be addressed by:

- First, discussion with core group members;
- Second, if required, involvement of respective managers / child protection advisers (e.g. child protection manager for Children's social care, designated / named safeguarding children doctor / nurse, teacher or police DCI);
- If the situation remains unresolved see **Escalation Policy**.

Conclusion

- Effective Core Group working means effective communication between all of the Core Group members.
- Research tells us that when core groups work well, the outcomes for children are more positive.
- Effective Core Groups have a critical part to play in the provision of high quality Child Protection Services in Swindon.
- Effective group communication in turn reduces the potential for misunderstanding between parent and professional.
- Effective group communication maximises the potential for positive change by the parent or makes it clear after proper analysis and at the earliest possible time when the parent appears unable to make the changes necessary to safeguard the child in the long term
- Effective group communication ensures that the child's viewpoint informs all decision-making
- Effective group communication ensures that the child's health and development is actively promoted
- Lastly, effective group communication strengthens the value of the Child Protection process and the Child Protection Plan. This ensures that we are better able to safeguard and protect the most vulnerable children in Swindon.

Research

Elizabeth Harlow (2004) Protecting Children: Why Don't Core Groups Work?

Lessons from the Literature, Practice, 16:1, 31-42,

This research details the importance of Core Groups in safeguarding children. It focuses on three elements needed to ensure that Core Groups work well. Inter-agency co-operation, inter-professional communication and partnership with parents and children.

Appendix 1

CORE GROUP MEETING AGENDA

1. Introductions

This is the.....Core Group since the last CP Conference on.....when.....were placed on/continued to be on a Protection Plan under the category of neglect/physical/sexual/emotional abuse.

The purpose of the meeting is to share information and review and amend the Protection Plan and assess it's impact for the child and what needs to change.

2. Attendance at the Core Group

3. Apologies and if a report or verbal update received. Note who will feedback the outcome of the Core Group to that professional and parents and child if they didn't attend the meeting.

4. Dates child /children seen and by which Core Group member.(Social work visits should be at least every 10 days)

5. Update since the last meeting from each core group member.

6. Review the progress of each action point on the Protection Plan and consider impact on the child/children. What is working well? What are the risks? What needs to change?

7. Views of the parents/carers/child(ren) on the Plan

8. What is the current risk assessment? Have the risk factors increased or decreased? Professional assessment of the parent's

engagement with the Plan and their capacity to change?

9. What agreed amendments have been made to the Protection Plan including additional SMART actions?

10. For the last Core Group before the RCPC what is the Core Group's view on continuing the Protection Plan. What are the reasons for this? Are there any professional disagreements?

11. Is anyone unhappy and wanting to raise a concern?

12. If the plan is not being progressed or if the plan is going well should the CPC be brought forward?