**Practice Note for all Practitioners, Managers and Staff:**

**Strengths-based practice: Signs of Safety**

**Safety**

Strengths-based practice ‘values the capacity, skills, knowledge, connections and potential in individuals and communities’ (Iriss 2012). At the same time, the approach is informed by the need to understand risks and challenges for children, young people and their families within their network. In Sandwell, we use Signs of Safety as our strengths-based approach which focuses on the importance of building upon children and family’s strengths and doing work ‘with’ them family and not ‘to’ them. It is an approach that reinforces the importance of relationship-based and difficulties experienced by families to build upon these strengths, find their own solutions to think about ways to increase safety and reduce risk for their children reducing the need for professional involvement.

In Sandwell, we recognise the importance of adopting a strengths-based approach when working with our families and undertaking assessments, plans, updating plans and reviews. This is the reason that using a strengths-based approach when we are working with our families is at the heart of our Practice Framework and Model. Within our Practice Framework and Model, strengths-based practice is at the heart of our practice (Element 4). alongside Relationship Based Practice and Trauma informed approaches (Practice Notes on Relationship Based Practice and Trauma informed Practice).

The purpose of this practice note is to outline what is Signs of Safety by focusing on some key concepts, why the approach is so important when working with children, young people and families and at the heart of our Practice Framework and Model. Next how using Signs of Safety alongside the other parts of our Practice Framework and Model will strengthen how we work with families developing danger statements, safety goals and planning when undertaking assessments, plans and decision making. Finally, the note identifies the importance of reflective spaces such as supervision to develop our strengths-based practice.

**What is Signs of Safety?**

Signs of Safety is an approach to working with children, young people and their families developed in the 1990’s by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards. It is a relationship-grounded, safety-organised approach to child protection practice, created by researching what works for professionals and families in building meaningful safety for vulnerable and at-risk children. Using Signs of Safety promotes and approach where practitioners have an open conversation with a family about the safety of their children and developing a joint understanding of the situation causing harm and what needs to happen to ensure the child/young person’s safety.

The theoretical foundations of strengths-based practice such as Signs of Safety connect and overlap with other social work theories such as systemic, relationship-based practice and psychoanalytic theories. Collectively these focus on the importance of practice that is informed by thinking about how individuals, families and communities operate, childhood, parenting experiences, conscious and unconscious processes that might impact on our ability to form relationships (Research in Practice 2018). The purpose of Signs of Safety is to ensure that everyone involved in a child's life has the same understanding of the strengths and the worries and work with the family to agree the goals that need to be reached to make sure that the child/young person always remains safe and well. Children, parents and everyone naturally connected to the children should be at the centre of the assessment, planning and decision making.

Signs of Safety revolves around a risk assessment framework and case planning format that supports practitioners with a structure and enables them to develop their skills in effective and meaningful relationships with using our whilst understanding each family unique culture, communities, background and exploration of danger/harm, alongside indicators of strengths and safety.

Image 1 below illustrates the risk assessment framework three columns, scaling and seven analysis categories, which is referred to as ‘mapping’ and includes four domains for inquiry:

**What are we worried about? (**Past harm, future danger and complicating factors)

**What’s working well?** (Existing strengths and safety)

**What needs to happen**? (Future safety)

**Scaling** - immediate response required from Children’s Social Care (0= no signs of safety) 10 means no further action required (10 = high levels of safety)

*Image 1 (Signs of Safety Handbook)*

This risk assessment framework is designed to be used together with families and their support people to establish a child’s safety and what measures need to be put in place to reduce risks to children and young people.

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**Why is adopting Signs of Safety our Strengths Based approach so important and at the heart of our Practice Framework and Model?**

There are several reasons why using a strengths-based approach is important when working with families:

Adopting a strengths-based approach with families not only helps them to identify resources for coping, but also helps them to use existing strengths to create and sustain hope and a sense of purpose by setting and achieving their own goals.

By working in partnership with families, we are more likely to increase safety and reduce risk by focusing on the family’s strengths, resources and support networks. This is more likely to reduce the need for continued professional involvement unless necessary.

A Signs of Safety approach allows families every opportunity to come up with and apply their solutions before professionals offer to implement theirs which is more likely to be sustained after our involvement ends.

* The involvement of the child’s family and network should always be pursued whether the child lives within or outside of the family. This will ensure everything is done to sustain the child’s life long connection with their family, culture and community.
* Using a strengths-based approach encourages practitioners to become more attuned and sensitive to working with people with different experiences and backgrounds, which allows us to effectively interact, work, and develop meaningful relationships.
* Used by different partner agencies, Signs of Safety also enables practitioners across different disciplines to work collaboratively and in partnership with families and children.

Critiques of strengths-based practice include the argument that sometimes the emphasis on the individual and their family networks does not sufficiently consider structural issues, such as poverty and oppression, that also contribute to family difficulties. In doing so, it has been argued, it can place all the responsibility on individuals and families. However, using strengths-based approaches in a way that empowers families and considers these factors as we do when using our Practice Framework and Model addresses this. It enables practitioners to work with families in a way that builds, enabling and empowering relationships whilst also considering how these structural inequalities impact on our families.

**How does using Signs of Safety strengthen our practice when working with families?**

Our Practice Framework and Model has been developed using a strengths-based approach at its heart to support our thinking when working with our families and their network. Throughout our work with children and their families we need to demonstrate that we are doing work ‘with’ families rather than ‘to’ them. Recognising the value of our relationships with children and their families and any past and present trauma will lead to more robust assessments, plans and ultimately improved outcomes for the child and or young person. The next section of this note will explore how using the Signs of Safety risk assessment framework with the Practice Framework and Model will support practitioners with balancing the things that we things we need to do with families, as well as the things we need to think about to support our understanding of each family’s unique strengths.

**What are we worried about (Column 1)**

Our initial stages of working with children and their families using Signs of Safety includes building the relationship. Adopting an approach where we recognise that the family are the expert of their experiences and adopting a position of ‘not knowing’ and being ready to learn will assist practitioners to get to know the family functioning, history, traditions, own childhood experiences and how these may impact on their parenting.

Using the Relationship Based Building Blocks to develop trusting and meaningful relationships helps us to think about our intervention by breaking down the relationship and the type of work we are doing with the family into three stages. These include building relationships, maintaining and sustaining them and future proofing them for children. How we develop our relationship to understand the worries will consider individual people’s experiences, backgrounds, views, identities and responses to specific situations.

When working with the family to explore the three analysis categories (harm, danger and complicating factors), understanding their perspectives whilst providing them with an understanding of the concerns and risks to their children/young people, and reasons for our involvement will ensure the family have a shared understanding of what the worries are.

Considering any ‘past harm’ reminds us that each child and young person’s journey through our service within the context of their family is unique even if they are part of a sibling group and understanding it is important. Using the ‘Child’s Journey’ (Principle 1 of our Practice Framework and Model) helps us to think about the risks, as well as the strengths and needs of each child and family at the start of our involvement, whilst evaluating the quality of the previous support to strengthen our current intervention. Adopting a trauma informed approach helps us to think about any possible continuing support that might be required because of their experience.

Continuing to think about what we are worried about, interpreting ‘danger’ to a child and young person, the Child’s Journey supports us to form a hypothesis about what is likely to happen to the child (ren) if nothing in the family’s situation changes. This helps us to think about whether the help and support provided previously addressed both the root cause as well as the presenting concerns (See Practice Note the Child’s Journey) and how we will work with them to improve the outcomes for their child. Using Family group conferences (FGCs) increases participation and provides time for them to make their own plans to present to professionals to increase safety.

There may be complicating factors or actions and behaviours in and around the family, the child and by professionals that make it more difficult to solve danger of future abuse. These relate to factors/issues make life for the family harder, making building safety for the child more difficult? For example, poverty, addiction, mental illness, isolation, family dispute, cultural differences, professional discord. Using Cultural genograms and Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS (Burnham 2013) enables us to think about our approach to working with individuals and different families recognise the power differentials, making the necessary adjustments whilst developing our cultural competence when working with families (Practice Notes Cultural Competence and Cultural Genograms).

Developing a trusting and open relationship with the child/young person and family will help them to share with professionals the difficulties (i.e. trauma) particularly adversities that could be the root cause of concern.

**Danger statements:**

Once this is done, a danger statement(s) can be developed that sets out out what the specific worry/harm is now, and likely to be in the future should nothing change. The benefit of having danger statements are that they keep us focused on what the Trust is worried about should little or no change happen. There should be one danger statement for each issue and should include who is worried, what is the worry and why is it a worry – impact on the child and young person. Using clear and simple verbal and written language that the family understands, focusing on behaviours including statements using the words of the child or parent are powerful. See Appendix 1 for examples.

**What’s working well (Column 2)**

Once the worries have been mapped out, we then need to map out what is working well, relating to what are the strengths in the family and what safety measures are already in place.

Existing safety relates to proven safety over time when the child was protected in relation to the danger and identifying what actions/skills are already in place by the family that support the child(ren)/young person’s safety. Strengths relate to the positive aspects of the situation. These could become safety if they prove to keep the child safe over time.

Developing a trusting and open relationship with the child/young person and family will help them to also focus on their strengths. Using the 4 x I’s enables us to understand from the child or young person’s perspective what they feel is working well for them. They will be empowered to identify the things that are going well for them and build on their resilience to influence and develop safety plans, which encourages a strengths-based approach to our work with children. This also enables children and families to know that their views and experiences are being used to make a difference to their lives.

By providing them with opportunities to be listened to and using their views to shape their assessments, plans and reviews, they are more likely to have more meaningful engagement with practitioners working with them. In doing so, means we will have a better understanding of what life is like for the child and young person, by listening to their journey from their perspectives, which means we will make a positive difference to outcomes for our children and young people.

Using strengths-based approaches to identify a family’s existing strengths relate to skills or actions the child, young person or family and their network can do well. Developing cultural genograms and completing life work with families will help children, young people and their families to understand through direct work what is happening now and what has happened before. This work needs to be creative, meaningful, use a strengths-based approach which considers all aspects of the individual identity and culture of the family, and thinking about what has worked well for the family historically, and at present.

Helping children and families to understand their life history as an intervention can help and support relationship building as well how it impacts on their current circumstances, which can be supported with impact chronologies. These are meaningful chronologies that demonstrate through the identification of sequential, factual, significant events the impact on the child’s/young person’s/young adult’s life and helps us inform decision making. An impact chronology should ensure that the themes, trends and patterns of events are analysed and inform the current assessment and plan (See Practice Note on Impact Chronologies).

When recording the strengths and safety measures, ensure that all those involved including the child/young person and family have a shared understanding of what is going well, their achievement and support networks this will support the reduction of the worries. These are to be recorded using language the family are familiar with, jargon free, easy to be understood and accurate.

**What needs to happen (Column 3)**

**Safety goals:**

When thinking about what needs to happen, we will work with families to develop safety goals, which are clear, simple statements about what (not how) the parent/caregiver will do that will convince everyone the child is safe and their needs are being met now and in the future. Creating safety goals with families uses family friendly language and descriptions of the behaviour expected of parents/carers and what needs to be seen by professionals to demonstrate they know how to keep their child safe. See appendix 2 for examples of safety goals.

In writing the safety goals, the practitioner needs to consider:

* Who are the people that will be taking responsibility for working toward the families goal.
* What will parents/caregivers do differently to make changes – (It’s important when creating this part of the safety goal that it includes actions the parent can and are able to demonstrate.
* Realistic timescales need to be set to complete the goals, so the parents/carers know how long it will take before their circumstances are safe enough for the case to be closed

Using our three intervention aids will ensure that when we follow any of our processes and do the work that we do with families, we reflect on whether we are making a difference and we understand the different stages of our relationship with families and how to adjust approaches throughout our work. By using a strengths-based approach we can evidence that there is an equal balance between process and intervention.

**Next Steps:**

At this stage of our involvement, a robust assessment will have been completed, as part of our process framework, whilst considering the things we need to think about, which identifies strengths and resources within the family, as well as areas where additional support may be required. Ensuring that children and families have the right type of support, whilst considering their parent or carers ability to maintain, sustain positive changes within the child’s timescale, will ensure that the next steps are meaningful, timely and SMART (See Practice Note on Children’s Plans). Next steps will have considered what worked well for families previously, and at present, which will shape our future interventions with them.

Using our Intervention Aids will help such as the Scales can be used as a reminder that there is an equal balance between what we have to ‘do’ with a family (process) and the things that we offer (intervention) to children and their families, when thinking about their next steps (see Practice Note on Intervention Aids).

 **Scaling**

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Scaling is used to help everyone understand each person’s viewpoint in relation to a particular area. It helps to make professionals’ thinking clear to the family (and to the other professionals), and it helps professionals understand where different members of the family are at.

The scale is a starting point for exploring what is currently working in the family and what needs to change to go higher up the scale towards achieving our goal for the child/ young person.

It provides a measurement process that everyone can understand, so everybody involved – including family members, support people and professionals – can keep assessing the situation and how much progress is being made.

Scaling is used to make a judgement about the impact of a situation on a child/ young person. The scale goes from 0-10. When scaling, make sure you define what 0 and 10 mean, and always present 10 (what we are working towards) first. The scale would usually be based on the worry/danger statement. When used within meetings, each professional and family member states where they are on the scale, and why. Each person’s scale and reason should be recorded.

Questions about where people have scaled can be used to recognise the good things that are happening (‘what makes it a 3 and not 0’), explore ideas for what should happen next (‘what would you need to see happen to make it one point higher’) and explore what we need to see to be sure the problems are sorted out (‘what would a 10 look like?’).

Scaling is a tool that facilitates discussions on what you think might be happening for a child and their family, and a shared understanding of the circumstances that require scaling. There is no right and wrong answer, but you will need to say why you have chosen that number, and what you would need to see to increase the scale by one point. It is not important that everyone agrees, but it is important that everyone understands why people’s views differ. There are various ways of asking a safety scale question, depending on the context of the case.

The questions should be in line with the danger or worry statement and is asking about the current lived experience. However, it is critical that safety scale questions clearly define both the worst case (0) and best case (10) scenarios and they are clearly understood, before those involved on the case give their scores. See appendix 1 for examples of scaling questions.

**Safety Planning**

Safety planning within Signs of Safety is designed to create a proactive, structured and monitored process that provides parents/carers a genuine opportunity to demonstrate they can care for their child/young person in ways that satisfies all those involved with the family.

They provide a set of arrangements that are discussed and agreed with families that describe how they will go about everyday life and show that the children will be safe. Safety plans should be viewed as a continuous part of our intervention with families sometimes developed immediately due to concerns of significant harm and should be reviewed and updated as the case progresses and situations within the family change.

Safety plans can be developed and presented in a variety of ways and should always endeavour to be co-produced with children, young people as illustrated as well as their parents/carers when it is safe and appropriate to do so. This will be more meaningful and with support will be owned by the family when our involvement ceases and supports us to ‘future proof’ our relationships and interventions (See Practice Note on Relationship Based Practice).

Words and pictures are used to create a version of events that occurred or when abuse or harm has happened, and the safety plan is used to address and reduce the likelihood of the event/harm occurring again. Using direct work tools can provide a great source of information about the parent or caregivers behaviours from the child’s perspective and the impact of these on the child. The child/young person’s voice will also inform what they would like to see happen for them to feel safe. This may lead to further discussions around ‘Safety Houses’ which could contribute to immediate or future Safety Planning.

**How we develop our strengths-based approach using reflective spaces such as Supervision?**

Using reflective spaces especially supervision is important to strengthen our strengths-based approach as practitioners. Supervision helps to focus on our Practice Framework and Model to ensure that when we complete assessments, plan, reviews and update plans that we are doing this with the family. It also provides a safe space where we can reflect our feelings that can emerge when we work with families and provide us with a way of thinking about them and how we might relate to families for several reasons. Using a strength-based approach alongside relationship based and trauma informed practice, allows for more robust assessments and plans, created with the family at a level that is right for them. This results in the family receiving the right amount of process and intervention to achieve good outcomes.

Our Practice Framework and Practice Reflective Questions includes questions that are relevant to strengths-based practice and can be used within supervision, group supervision and other reflective spaces to help us undertake an appreciative enquiry. These questions provide a framework to develop our skills in critical thinking and analysis to our intervention with a child/young person/young adult and family (See pages 42-50 Practice Framework and Model Booklet, or Appendix 2 for questions specific to strength-based practice). Reflecting with your manager about creative ways to work with families based on a good understanding of the family’s background, culture and identity strengthens our ability to be reflexive and reflective. Regular Group Supervision and Team Learning also provide reflective spaces to develop strengths-based practice.

**How to evidence use of Signs of Safety on the child’s file?**

* Direct work such as My Three House/My Wizard could be attached to the updated single assessment and referenced in the child’s assessment, with an understanding of how the direct work has informed the child’s views.
* Safety planning work (safety plans) could be uploaded to the child’s documents, with reference to the safety plan within the case summary.
* Case notes could include details of intervention with children and families regarding their trajectory setting, danger statements, safety goals and scaling questions used as part of assessment sessions.
* Children and young people’s plans and supervision records should include reference to what we are worried about, what’s working well, what needs to happen with clear timescales and evidence of scaling questions and rationale for the rating we have provided.

**Good Practice points**

* Use the family’s language where at all possible, and the language of those who identified the harm – other professionals etc.
* Engaging the children, both bringing their voice into the assessment and plans and explaining to them and their parents about what is happening.
* Assessment and plans are updated with children and families using the language that they are familiar with that enables them to understand what is happening and the rationale for the decisions being made. This makes the process of the plan that has been developed with them transparent.
* Using our Practice Framework and Model when undertaking any assessment will result in a holistic view of children and family’s circumstances to be developed.

**Further information and reading**

* Practice notes relating to Assessments, Plans, Updating Plans, Reviews, Child’s Journey, Children’s Participation, Relationship-Based Practice and Trauma Informed Practice are available on the Learning and Development Pages
* Access ‘CC inform’ and ‘Research in Practice’ including the document ‘Leading Stregth Based Practice Frameworks, Stratg
* Pattonni (2012), Strength-Based approaches for working with individuals Iriss 2012 Insight 16.

**Appendices:**

Appendix 1: Examples of Danger Statements, Safety Goals and Scaling questions

Appendix 2: Reflective Questions

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