

Practice issues from Serious Case Reviews

11. Unfocused discussion in child protection conferences

What is the issue?

Discussion between agencies in child protection conferences can lack purpose

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Child protection conferences are a key forum for family members (and the child where appropriate), supporters, advocates and professionals most involved with the child and family to make decisions about the child's future safety, health and development. An important task of the initial child protection conference is to develop a child protection plan with clear actions and timescales, which is then monitored at subsequent conferences. This task depends on clear and purposeful communication during the meeting, to ensure that these discussions lead to a clear plan document.

Our analysis of SCRs found that the discussion in child protection conferences did not always fulfil its intended purpose. For example, in one case involving concerns of neglect for three children whose mother had a learning disability, an initial child protection conference for the children was held, and determined that two of the children be placed on child protection plans. The minutes from the initial child protection conference were considered in the SCR to 'lack focus', with little analysis of the current situation to keep the children safe within the family, including the mother's capacity and motivation to change. The plan included 'vague actions' for the agencies around the family, not clearly identifying what was needed to monitor aspects of care, clear timescales for change, how this would be measured and what would happen if no change occurred.

This document is one of a set of 14 briefings intended to support managers, senior managers and practitioners by:

- identifying difficult issues in multi-agency safeguarding work, focusing on interprofessional communication and decision-making
- exploring why these issues arise, and therefore how they might be addressed.

The briefings are based on analysis of 38 Serious Case Reviews (SCRs) published between May 2014 and April 2015, augmented by information gathered from multi-agency summits in London, Leeds and Birmingham. The summits were held in September 2015 and were attended by 194 practitioners and managers from across children's social care, health, education, police, probation and Local Safeguarding Children Boards (LSCBs).

The briefings are the result of a pilot process that developed and tested new ways that SCR findings can be shared and used to support improvement.

Why does this occur?

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The **analysis within the SCR report** for this case highlighted the following underlying reasons that contributed to this issue:

- a lack of challenge from the chair about significant gaps in information or lack of progress on the child protection plan – the SCR author commented that this was exacerbated by not wanting to be too demanding of social workers due to the pressure they were under
- the structure of the child protection plan document did not support a focus on what a safe environment would look like, or on reviewing progress.

Participants at the three summits also identified a number of underlying reasons for this issue including the following:

Status, hierarchy and challenge

Participants reported that the quality of discussion in conferences could be hindered by reluctance to disagree with professionals who were seen to have greater knowledge or power:

'[people] take the lead from police or social workers, then fall in to line.' (Head of Children's Services)

Participants reported that this can make it difficult for knowledge held by the wider group of professionals to be taken into account. Some practitioners reported bad experiences of having challenged an opinion:

'If you are a minority, you are made to feel alienated within the conference ... hard to be a lone voice and newly-qualified social workers do not have the experience or ability to challenge.' (Head of Safeguarding Children)

The role of the conference chair

Participants noted that the role of the chair was very influential, sometimes to negative effect, with some chairs reported to align their views with particular professionals such as the social worker '*which sets a tone*' (LSCB manager). The skill of the chair was thought to be essential in terms of helping parents to participate, but this could be challenging:

'I think the chair felt out of her depth [with the mother].' (Probation Officer)

Lack of attendance of key staff groups

Participants noted that quality of discussion could be compromised when relevant professional groups did not attend, particularly if they were submitting complex evidence to the conference. Key groups where participation was difficult included the police and hospital doctors. People noted that there can be attrition in conference attendance, with numbers reducing over time, leading to gradual 'drift' and a feeling of loss of interest.

Staff turnover

Frequent staff changes across agencies were also thought to have an impact on the quality of conference discussions. One participant said:

'transient staff are why core groups are not happening but then [in] two/three months they are gone, so relying on that group of expertise ... is problematic and impacts on the purpose of [the] conference ... you do not have the intelligence.' (LSCB Manager)

Influence of family attendance at conferences

Participants at the summits clearly recognised that parents and children had a right to attend conferences. However, they also noted that the presence of the family could have an impact on discussions, and could 'curtail' the professional discussion. However, others recognised that the success of the plan depended on encouraging the family to participate and helping them understand what they needed to do.

Confusion relating to information-sharing

Some participants stated that there was still confusion among practitioners about information-sharing, and what they can and cannot share with other professionals and parents within the conference:

'Practitioners still get hung up on what they can and can't share ... it is about developing a culture about ill-baked assumptions.' (Child Protection Trainer and Learning Mentor)

Solutions suggested by summit participants

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Participants at the summits suggested the following possible solutions:

- joint multi-disciplinary supervision to provide clarity and consistency in values in relation to child protection conferences
- some participants thought the Signs of Safety model had helped to promote a strengths-based approach to child protection conferences
- the use of virtual meetings via teleconference facilities to boost agency attendance
- a pre-conference meeting where agencies are encouraged to gather and report on all information with the discussion focused on risk
- a move away from general terminology (e.g. 'continue to monitor').

Questions for you to consider

Unpicking the issue

1. Is this issue familiar to you?
2. Locally, is the issue exactly the same as described above? If not, what does this issue 'look like' for you?
3. What good practice is there in relation to this issue? Are there weaknesses you are aware of and how would you describe them?

Why do you think this happens in your local area?

1. Do some or all of the reasons described above apply in your area?
2. Is it an issue that has been identified in local SCRs, audits or inspection feedback? What light have these activities shed on the issue?
3. What knowledge do you have from your own experience about why this happens?
4. What organisational factors are involved locally?
5. How does local culture, custom and practice, within and between agencies, contribute to this?

Thinking through the solutions

1. Have there been previous efforts locally to address this issue? What was the result?
2. Given your understanding of the reasons for this issue, what further actions do you think would be helpful in addressing it?
3. What strengths can you build on, and what are the areas of difficulty?
4. What action would need to be taken at a strategic or leadership level?
5. Who would need to be involved to achieve improvement?
6. Are there any unintended consequences you anticipate for the different agencies and professions involved?
7. How will you know whether any actions have had an impact?

This briefing was produced as part of Learning into Practice, a one-year DfE funded project conducted by the NSPCC and SCIE between April 2015 and March 2016. For more information see nspcc.org.uk/lipp or scie.org.uk/lipp