Practice issues from Serious Case Reviews

10. Unequal weight given to views of different agencies in child protection conferences

What is the issue?

All agencies' views are not given equal weight in conference decision-making

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. Children's social care (CSC) have responsibility for convening and recording the decisions of the conference. All involved professionals are responsible for working together to safeguard the child.

In our analysis of SCRs, we found two examples in which input from professionals of different agencies did not appear to be given equal weight in conference decision-making. In these cases, representatives from CSC took the final decisions regarding, for example, removal from child protection plans, even when this ran counter to the opinion of other represented professions, some of whom had greater involvement with the family.

Why does this occur?

The **analysis within the SCR reports** for these cases highlighted in particular the role of the chair in managing inquorate conferences and lack of consensus, and highlighting escalation procedures open to professionals and families in regard to whether they disagree with conference decisions.

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.

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

Culture of child protection conferences

A number of participants reported feeling intimidated by child protection conferences, which discouraged them from speaking up during the meeting:

> *'The culture of those meetings, job titles, even what people wear to the meetings has an effect.' (Probation Officer)*

This reputation of conferences also caused inexperienced professionals to feel apprehensive about attending, to the extent that managers were known to go in the place of staff members:

> *'In health it feels … very intimidating, because there are "experienced professionals" there.' (Health Professional)*

Some participants described feeling 'outnumbered' at conferences:

> *'It is about the confidence of the person, if you are a minority you are made to feel alienated within the conference.' (Head of Safeguarding Children)*

Perceived power imbalances between agencies

CSC were seen by summit attendees as holding more power than other agencies, even when they did not have the greatest knowledge of the family. Participants reported that:

> *'Often at conferences the lead is children's social care and people are too intimidated to say anything … power imbalance.' (Nurse Consultant, Safeguarding)*

One specialist safeguarding practitioner said:

> *'The social worker's report carries much more weight at the conference than any other professional … and if they say to take the child off a protection plan that's what happens.'*

Clearly CSC bring important specialist safeguarding knowledge, but participant comments suggested that the balance between this and other sources of knowledge was not always well managed.

The role of the conference chair

The chair was seen as having a central role in encouraging equal contribution from all agencies. However, not all chairs were thought to be playing this role effectively:

> *'The chair should make the final decision but some [chairs] agree with the majority of the attendees.' (Head of Safeguarding Children)*

Conversely one participant highlighted that the voting system within these conferences rendered the chair undemocratic:

> *'I have a bit of a problem with the vote – the chair can override it so how democratic is the process really?' (Independent Chair)*

Lack of common language and terminology

It was also noted that an established 'common language' for conferences would help new or inexperienced workers to contribute to the meetings. Participants thought that working to shared understandings of risk and 'threshold descriptors' would also promote participation of all groups.

Presence of parents

The tension between participating openly in the conference, while maintaining an ongoing working relationship with parents, was highlighted by several participants:

> *'Emotions are running high for the parents and, at the end of the day, if you're still on a plan that's bad and that's a judgement on your parenting.'* (Probation Officer)

It was also recognised that parents themselves could be seen to wield power and they were reported to have *'threatened CSC with the media – very powerful'* (Early Help and Family Support Lead).

Solutions suggested by summit participants

Participants at the summits suggested the following possible solutions:

- the introduction of a 'practitioner mentor' role for less experienced staff to have someone to talk to before a conference in order to prepare them to be more able to contribute

- use of common risk and threshold descriptors

- some participants thought that the Signs of Safety model was a helpful tool.

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?