

Children & Family Services

A Policy & Framework for Practice with Children & Families

Signs of Safety, Stability and Success

1. This paper describes a practice framework which will underpin our work to improve the lives of children and families living in Leicestershire. The framework will be relevant for all those practitioners who work directly with children, young people and their families and with their wider networks of support. The framework provides an evidence based methodology for work with families across the continuum of need. It will help ensure that all teams and services are working coherently and more consistently as families move between teams. It is intended to be used as part of the induction process for new or returning workers, in workforce development, in the shaping of policies and procedures and in our quality assurance systems. In short it is written to remind all workers and managers of our ambition and our collective responsibility to develop and strengthen our practice based on evidence of what works and what families tell us works for them.

2. Departmental Vision:

Leicestershire is the best place for all children, young people and their families

3. Mission:

Children and young people in Leicestershire are safe and living in families where they can achieve their potential and have their health wellbeing and life chances improved within thriving communities

4. To deliver our mission we believe that children and young people, their parents and their natural networks of support need to be at the centre of all aspects of our work.

Family Work: The Departmental Philosophy

5. Working to keep families safely together where ever possible

Children must be protected from harm and neglect and children's safety remains our priority. For a small minority of children and young people, we know that it will not be safe for them to live with their families. Children and young people who are living away from their families need stability and permanence in their lives. Current departmental policy sets out our principles in this matter: 'All children have a right to experience family life, and wherever it is consistent with their health and welfare this should be with their own families (LCC Permanence Policy 2013 Revised 2016).

6. The Munro Review of Child Protection (2011) highlighted the importance of building resilience and reducing risk for families. We know that for the vast majority of children, growing up in their family networks and being close to their own communities is far better for them than living with strangers. In

Leicestershire we want to work with families in ways that ensure more and more children can live within their own support networks and communities.

7. Proportionate and tailored responses

Children need to receive the right help, at the right time. This means providing the lowest level of intervention necessary to meet need, working with families to help them resolve their issues and support them to get back on track as quickly as possible. Workers need to be 'risk savvy' and robustly monitor the changes that families and their networks put in place. We believe that almost all families are the experts on their own lives and most want the best for their children. However we will continue to check and challenge families so that children are safe, can achieve success and have stability in their lives.

8. Constructive working relationships are key to achieving lasting change

The department will work with the child's wider family and their supportive networks and connections to help families do their best for their children and achieve the changes that will work for them in the longer term. The strengths, skills and knowledge of families and their networks will help build solutions and support the family's capacity to change and keep children safe.

9. We know from both national research and our own practice experience that the children living in families who are isolated with few or poor social networks are at higher risk of poor outcomes, of neglect, abuse, and poor mental health. Helping parents identify and seek support at the earliest point from within their neighbourhood or naturally occurring networks can help strengthen families and support parents when they are struggling or feel overwhelmed. Working in this way helps to build solutions owned by families, providing greater safety for children and young people.

10. Development of a practice framework

The practice framework described here expresses the departmental commitment to high quality practice in our work with families. In developing the framework the goals are to;

- Identify and adopt a clear methodology for working with families across the continuum of services across the department.
- Identify and adopt a tested approach which equips practitioners to more effectively work with risk in families so that children are safe and protected both immediately and in the longer term.
- Harness the families' strengths as well as identifying concerns, risks or worries and developing shared goals and clear plans to create change.
- Be explicit and consistent in the way we make decisions – we must be able to show our analysis and evidence our rationale for all decisions taken including how we have taken into account the family's views.

- Ensure that practice is compassionate and based on working with families to help them change – not doing to families. The plan for achieving change is the family's plan. They describe the steps they will take to improve their situation.
- Enable practitioners to engage successfully with all families – even when there is denial of harm, or families are wary or fearful of professionals.

11. The Practice Framework

The practice framework is made up of 3 elements. These are set out below;

(a) Principles for excellence in practice

- The quality of the workers' relationship with the child/family is essential in a process of change.
- Children and families are more likely engage in a plan they helped to develop. Plans and decisions affecting children and families should be made in a meeting that includes the family support network as well as the professional network.
- Separating children from their families is often traumatic for children. Their distress can be lessened when they can safely stay close to their own communities and maintain their relationships with schools, friends and other natural connections.
- Assessments should focus on underlying needs, (as opposed to symptoms), as this promotes more effective intervention and lasting change.
- Success in school is a reliable predictor of child well-being. Planning for the safety, stability and success for children should be fully integrated with school support plans so that children can continue to make progress in their education.
- Services should be provided as close to the place where the child and family live and find most accessible.
- The role of line managers and supervisors is critical in ensuring plans are robust and effective in positively changing children's lives.

(b) The practice methodology: Signs of Safety, Stability and Success

- The Signs of Safety methodology is a 'strength based' model characterised by an inclusive partnership approach – work is undertaken collaboratively with families and their naturally occurring networks of support. Ownership of change rests with the family – who are seen as the experts on their own lives. Their networks of support are a cornerstone for effective change – workers help to build capacity in families to secure safety, stability and sustained success for children living in challenging circumstances.
- The methodology offers a 'fit for purpose' practice model which takes a stance of critical enquiry. This means workers must take a questioning approach to fully explore risks dangers or worries, distilling these into succinct and clear statements using plain language so they are fully understood by everyone involved.

There is equal commitment to identifying what is already working well in the network and identifying strengths which could be built upon to secure increased safety, stability and success.

There is a set of processes which are clear for both workers and families. Engaging children is central, ensuring their voice is brought into the assessment and the plan. Parents are supported to explain events and plans to children using a technique known as 'words and pictures' to help children understand and make sense of what is happening in their lives.

- The methodology provides a range of effective analytical tools to support assessment and planning, decision making and the engagement of children and families. Practice disciplines support workers to be specific and precise about their concerns. They involve workers and managers using plain language, focusing on specific observable behaviours as well as the skilful use of authority.

(c) Practice depth

- This methodology is not a stand-alone approach. The application and integration of professional knowledge is essential in the delivery of high quality practice. The knowledge and expertise gained through professional training, development and practice wisdom that are relevant to the complexity of each family's situation must be woven into the application of the methodology. For example:
 - In situations of neglect or cumulative harm the long term impact of chronic behaviours such as low warmth/high criticism parenting is considered
 - In domestic violence the psycho-social effects of witnessing domestic violence and abuse for children is demonstrated
 - Careful consideration of the impact of relevant complicating factors such as trauma, mental illness, developmental delay, fear of professionals
 - Clear evidence that the cultural context is considered so that the family members/people from that culture would say their culture has been respected
 - An understanding of the significant role that good attachment and healthy child development plays in early brain development of babies and children

12. Implementation

The Signs of Safety approach is already well embedded in Social Care in terms of Child Protection work and has been introduced to and adapted for our early intervention services. However our ambition is to extend the approach to other areas of our direct work with families for example in the Children Centre programme, Fostering and Adoption, Child Exploitation, and those working with special educational needs and disabilities.

The approach to implementation of the practice framework is focused across four areas:



a) Learning

This has included basic training for staff; advanced training for practice leaders / champions; a two year formal trajectory for practice leaders' development which includes a programme of workshops; and specific workplace based learning to grow confidence in the application of the methodology to develop critical thinking and analysis skills. Within the department practitioners and managers are trained in the approach working across Social Care and Early Help services. Close collaboration with learning & development colleagues is helping to ensure wider practitioner training is aligned and congruent. The refreshed CFS Workforce Strategy 2016/17 acknowledges the need to ensure that SOS becomes embedded further and sustained across the department.

b) Leadership

We have a strong departmental commitment to this framework. Our managers are standing together to transform our practice with families. They will continue to lead services and teams in ways that model the practice approach. They continue to embed the approach into practice through shared leadership, actively supporting learning and development activities focusing on key implementation and practice issues.

In addition, the Leicestershire & Rutland Safeguarding Board has recently adopted 'Signs of Safety' as a key priority and is actively supporting formal partner engagement to build a common language across agencies particularly in the field of child protection. The LSCB will continue to hold agencies to account for the quality and effectiveness of their interventions with children and families.

c) Organisational Alignment

This refers to the alignment with practice of all policies, procedures and forms. Whilst we have made steady progress in this area over the last eighteen months achieving the alignment of key areas including; child protection conferences; Children in Care review meetings; audit, and the supervision of staff. However there is much more to do and this work will continue and will over time extend to all departmental policies and processes to ensure close alignment where ever appropriate.

d) Meaningful Measures

The department continues to use data and key performance indicators to manage and monitor operational performance. In addition, we have made good progress in shaping our departmental quality assurance and improvement framework (QAIF) to more closely align with our practice framework including quality assurance, case audit and practice fidelity. The four critical domains are, understanding and using data, a qualitative analysis of practice through audit and practice observation, the voice of staff (staff wisdom) and the voice of children and families themselves.

13. Summary

The Children & Family Services department is adopting a practice framework to underpin its direct work with children and their families. We believe this will support the effective delivery of high quality services. The successful application of this framework in day to day practice will strengthen the capacity of parents and families to give the best care they can for their children and deliver improved outcomes for children, young people and their families.

References

Signs of Safety - Comprehensive Briefing Paper. Dr Andrew Turnell and Terry Murphy (3rd edition, 2014)

The comprehensive briefing paper provides a more detailed description of the approach and framework including its history, the supporting evidence base, the practice methodology, learning strategies and implementation.

'Signs of Something' - Adaptations of Signs of Safety across the Continuum of Service (Resolutions Consultancy, 2015)

This brief resource paper charts the key aspects of the Signs of Safety approach that are applied unchanged and those that are adapted across service areas and the continuum of service, with examples to illustrate.

Quality Matters in Children's Services: Messages from Research 2009 Mike Stein.

Recent Ofsted reports: Bristol 2014; Lincolnshire 2014; Norfolk 2015; Brent 2015; Wokingham 2015; West Sussex 2015

1. Practice Tools

Assessment and planning tools are used for “mapping” the worries, strengths and required safety, all in plain language. The map encompasses the key domains for enquiry, using the “**three columns**” and a scaling question:

- What are we worried about? (in child protection, the past harm, future danger, complicating factors)
- What is working well? (in child protection, the existing strengths and existing safety)
- What needs to happen? (in child protection, the family and child protection authority safety goals and next steps for future safety)
- The **scaling question** to make judgments, in child protection, about how safe the child is, from the perspective of the child protection authorities, the family, their networks and other professionals, to bring the case to judgment, develop understanding between the parties and to drive change.

Within these domains of enquiry are the risk assessment analysis categories that involve defining the harm, defining the danger, identifying existing safety and developing safety goals to address the danger statements, all in succinct plain language.

The Signs of Safety map, in its original form for child protection work is shown below. The four domains of enquiry and the different categories of analysis categories are labelled:

When we think about the situation facing this family:		
What are we Worried About?	What's Working Well?	What Needs to Happen?
<p>(Past) Harm (Future) <u>DANGER</u> <u>STATEMENTS</u> Complicating factors</p>	<p>Existing strengths Existing safety</p>	<p><u>SAFETY</u> <u>GOALS</u> Next steps (for future safety)</p>
<p>On a scale of 0 to 10 where 10 means everyone knows the children are safe enough for the child protection authorities to close the case and zero means things are so bad for the children they can't live at home, where do we rate this situation? (If different judgements place different people's number on the continuum).</p>		
0	←	→ 10

Signs of Safety assessment and planning are adaptable across service areas and the continuum of services, from early help through youth at risk to looked after children services. Workers in these areas of service are adjusting the language to fit with their area of work – essentially around signs of success and stability. This means that the methodology can be applied across a range of settings.

There are a number of tools for **engaging children**, and bring the child’s voice into the assessment. The **three houses** for example (the house of good things, the

house of worries, and the house of dreams) is a child's version of the three columns to capture their experience, in their own words.

Words and pictures explanations are used to support parents to explain what has happened in a child's life and why and if applicable, set out the safety plan.

2. Principles

Working relationships are fundamental, with families and other professionals

We know from research that the best outcomes for vulnerable children are achieved when constructive relationships exist with both the family and across the professional network.

Critical inquiry – always being prepared to admit you may have it wrong

In relation to child protection practice, Eileen Munro (1997, 1998) states 'the single most important factor in minimizing errors is to admit that you may be wrong'.

Practitioners need to take a questioning approach and remain open minded. Practice is characterised by more asking and less telling.

Landing grand aspirations in everyday practice

Families, young people and children together with front line practitioners are the arbiters of whether practice works. This means creating a reflective environment where we are learning from what works; where we are working with families not doing to. This will help to ensure that practice delivers the changes families need and avoids a 'command and control' approach or 'conveyor belt' practice.

3. Disciplines

The disciplines of the methodology help to guide workers' behaviour in the application of the approach:

- There is a clear and rigorous understanding of the distinction between past harm, future danger and complicating factors (such as mental health issues, and drug and alcohol abuse).
- There is a clear and rigorous distinction between family strengths and actual behaviours identified that demonstrate a capacity to protect the children.
- Plain language is used routinely so that everything can be readily understood by everyone in the family network.
- All statements focus on specific observable behaviours. Statements avoid vague general terms and must not imply a judgement.
- Skilful use of authority means recognising that the exercise of statutory authority involves a level of coercion. Families can still be given choices about the ways they can engage with practitioners to find the best fit for each family.
- Assessment is always a work in progress rather than an end in and of itself.

4. Processes

The core processes of *Signs of Safety* practice involve the following elements:

- Mapping the assessment and plan, doing so with the family and their network of support. Other professionals who share a concern for the children or young person also contribute. There is equal commitment to identifying what is working well and identifying the strengths of the network and elements of existing safety.
- Narrowing the information into short and clear statements of past harm and future danger (what will happen if nothing changes).
- Using scaling to make a judgment about how safe the children are from different perspectives.
- Developing safety goals that directly address the danger statements.
- Building a safety plan with detailed actions to achieve the safety goals, drawing on the family's network. The family's success in using the plan is monitored initially by the professional network but over time this role is passed to the family's safety network. The safety plan is a journey not a product.
- Engaging the children to ensure their voice is included in the assessment.
- Working with parents to help them explain to children what is happening and why.