

Evaluating the new 'Strengthening Families/Signs of Safety Model for conducting child protection conferences on the Isle of Wight.

The Strengthening Families Framework for Child Protection Case Conference's was introduced on the Isle of Wight in December of 2011.

Background:

Research indicates that the traditional model for conducting child protection conferences is effective at enabling the sharing of professional information in relation to risk but tends to focus on the negative aspects of family life and is often more problem focused rather than solution focused. Feedback from families and professionals suggests that participants often experience the conventional conference arrangements as intimidating and punitive.

The new Strengthening families Model:

This was originally developed in the U.K. by West Berkshire Council and is currently being introduced by a number of local authorities across England.

The main aim of using the new model in child protection conferences is to establish a partnership between families and professionals, so that they will cooperate and work towards mutually agreed goals. Families attending conferences should feel respected, listened to and actively involved.

The Conference Process/Stages:

- The chair meets with family members before the conference to talk about how it will run and how they might best participate.
- There is an 'ice-breaker' session at the start of the Conference where the family help to create their own family tree on a white board at the front of the room. This helps to put families at their ease, and reinforces the fact that they are able and expected to contribute.
- Whilst the family are being prepared, professionals will be sitting in another room reading other professional reports.
- The professionals and family members join one another in the same room and are introduced.
- There is a session where the family, as well as professionals are encouraged to share information and views. The information shared is recorded on a white board that everyone can see under the following headings: Danger/risks/unmet need- Strengths/Protective Factors-Complicating Factors-Grey Areas.
- Following all information being shared the social worker is asked for their risk statement i.e. what might be the outcome for the child if things don't change.
- Next steps are then recorded on the white board with identified outcomes to reduce risk and address unmet need. Actions are identified and recorded to achieve the outcomes and linked to individuals with timescales.
- Finally participants are asked if the plan developed meets the threshold for a child protection plan and if so under which required category.

Initial Feedback from other local authorities that have implemented this model.

This has been positive. The benefits include increased engagement and participation from families, with families feeling less intimidated and more able to constructively challenge professionals. The new model with its focus on achievable specific outcomes

has helped in evaluating and evidencing what works when engaging families in child protection/ safeguarding work.

Initial Impressions data analysis on the Island- April 2012

Since 16-01-12, a sample of 20 child protection conferences conducted under the new strengthening families model have had the attending family members and professionals canvassed for their views about the new model. They were asked to complete a simple initial impressions questionnaire at the end of the Conference. Of the 20 Conferences sampled 18 provided Questionnaires that were completed by parents/carers attending at the end of the meetings.

In 16 of these 18 Conferences the parents/carers noted that they found 'helpful the new strengthening families model and the new professional's format for written reports. In 16 Conferences of the 18 sampled the parents/carers noted that they found the new arrangements 'helpful' using additional comments which included 'friendly' and 'listened to'. In 15 of the 18 Conferences parents and carers noted that they experienced the planning process as 'helpful'. Of the sample of 20 Conferences there were 8 that involved children/young people of sufficient age and understanding to be able to attend and participate in the process. Of those 8 children/ young people 4 attended conferences. Of those 4 all described the conference process as 'helpful' and said that that they understood what was happening and that they felt involved in the discussion and the planning.

Of the professionals attending the 20 Conferences all noted the new process was 'helpful' and that it created an environment that allowed greater 'openness', 'engagement' and 'transparency'. Some professionals suggested technical improvements that might facilitate even greater engagement and effectiveness i.e. 'remove the conference table', 'use white boards instead of Flip chart paper', 'Invest in new IT'. 'Buy electronic pens'.

Feedback from a focus group of Island professionals , who regularly attend the new strengthening families model for child protection case conferences (9-07-12)

On the 19th of July 2012 a focus group was held consisting of professionals who regularly attend child protection case conferences.

Representatives from Health, Childrens Social Work, the Childrens Society and the IDAS Service were present, with written feedback submitted by the Police who were unable to attend.

The Group was asked to consider the impact of the Strengthening Families Model on child protection conference arrangements; 7 months after its implementation.

The Group considered the strengths, the weaknesses, and suggestions for future improvements.

1-The Strengths

The group noted that the use of flip chart paper and felts in mapping the concerns and the signs of safety on the wall, as well as the recording of the plan on the wall, added a powerful visual tool and reinforced the process for both families and professionals. It

sent a strong message of openness and transparency to all parties and it was noted that it had resulted in improved partnership working and better and more successful outcomes for children.

Professionals stated that the less formal nature of the arrangements was 'more comfortable' for families and that they were more open to discussion and challenging professionals.

There was less of a 'them and us situation'.

Professionals appreciated the fact that a brief summary of the decision and the write up of any plans made were available to all parties, within 2 days of the Conference.

Professionals all felt on balance that arrangements were a significant improvement on the previous conventional arrangements for conducting child protection conferences.

2- Weaknesses

Some professionals said that the less formal nature of arrangements sometimes had its drawbacks and judged that parents taking breaks and being allowed to speak too freely, took away the seriousness of the occasion. Some professionals felt that families did not always appreciate how serious the risks were, or did not fully understand the consequences of their actions if they did not comply with professional requests. This led to a discussion within the focus group of how effective partnership working can achieve real and sustainable change.

Some professionals; the Police and the IDAS representative, said that parents needed to be 'rained' in more at conferences and managed more firmly by the chair.

They felt that whilst the less formal approach had allowed families the opportunity to participate more and challenge professionals, it had at times disempowered professionals in challenging families and addressing the risks as extensively as they would like.

3- Suggestions for Improvements.

Some professionals suggested that there should be an option for a core group meeting to be held immediately follow the Conference, providing parties agreed, as by holding the core group in the days that followed it sometimes resulted in a loss of momentum and some key professionals who had attended the Conference did not attend subsequent core group meetings. This is an approach that has been piloted in other English local authorities with some positive feedback.

Professionals noted that conferences were sometimes convened at too short notice with insufficient information brought to Conference and incomplete assessments. This was noted to be particularly the case with pre-birth case conference.

The Police wanted more opportunity to meet the chair before the Conference and share intelligence which they judged significant, but that because it was untested, they did not want shared with the families.

The Police and the IDAS representative said that they would like more structure and control exercised by the chair at Conferences.

Chairs observations.

The comments from professionals highlights a recognition that the changes to the arrangements for conducting child protection case conferences has been positive in improving partnership working between families and professionals but also in facilitating improved working relationships between professionals.

Whilst some professionals have reservations about the relative informality of the new process it should be noted that research into how we achieve positive outcomes and sustainable change with vulnerable families, indicates that formal working boundaries and structures are important but are not the most significant factors in promoting change. Kieran Mc Keown 2000; Social & Economic Research Consultant, completed an

extensive study: 'A guide to what works in family support services for vulnerable families' 2000 Dublin.

He identified the key factors facilitating change and calculated the strength of their influence in percentages.

The quality of the information available about children and families i.e. assessments, chronology's etc he analysed was the the most influential factor in determining outcomes. He calculated a 40% influence share. The Quality of the working relationship with service users/clients he calculated to have a 30% influence share. The degree of hope or motivation to change on the part of service users/ clients he calculated had a 15% influence share. Finally the method of intervention and how forums were delivered he calculated had a 15% share.

The new strengthening families/ Signs of safety model is particularly focused on collaborative approaches to achieving change and emphasises the importance of facilitating an open and respectful environment, which maximises information sharing opportunities, resulting in highly informed planning and improved working relationships. I found the feedback form the focus group helpful and a number of the practical suggestions are being actively considered in discussions with agency leads. The proposal to have an option to hold core group meetings immediately following some child protection conferences, was judged to be viable in the case of review child protection case conferences but not appropriate with initial conferences, as current social work team transfer requirements dictate that the case continue to be held by the transferring out team after conference, to enable a limited period of joint working and handover implementation with the receiving team.

Alec Parsons; Interim Child Protection Conference Chair Date: 06-08-12