

Multi agency involvement in Child Protection Conferences – Royal Borough of Greenwich

Introduction

As part of the Annual scrutiny process agreed by the Greenwich Safeguarding Children Partnership (GSCP) it was proposed that an area for consideration by the Independent Scrutineer would be the involvement of agencies in multi-agency arrangements to protect children specifically Child Protection Case Conferences (CPCC) but also whether this was reflected in engagement in strategy discussions and core groups. Initially this was to examine whether there had been an impact of changes in arrangements within agencies, specifically police and health visiting /school nursing, on attendance and engagement with local safeguarding practice. Initially the focus of the piece of work was on quoracy of child protection case conferences (see below for definition) ensuring that there were representatives from key agencies attending conference, sharing information and decision making. As part of this process, involvement in strategy discussions was also examined.

Child protection conferences are held after a s47 process and it is a process whereby professionals come together to identify and address serious concerns about a child who they believe is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm through abuse or neglect. A child protection conference brings together family members (and the child/ren where appropriate), supporters / advocates and those professionals most involved with the child and family to make decisions and a plan to address the child's future safety, health, and development.

A Conference quorum is stated in the London Child protection procedures as:

As a minimum quorum, at every conference there should be attendance by local authority children's social care and at least two other professional groups or agencies, which have had direct contact with each child who is the subject of the conference. In addition, attendees may also include those whose contribution relates to their professional expertise or responsibility for relevant services. In exceptional cases, where a child has not had relevant contact with three agencies (that is, local authority children's social care and two others), this minimum quorum may be breached.

In exceptional circumstances, the Chair may decide to proceed with the conference despite lack of agency representation. This would be relevant where:

A child has not had relevant contact with three agencies (e.g. pre-birth conferences);

Sufficient information is available; and

A delay will be detrimental to the child.

Where an inquorate conference is held, an early review conference should be arranged.

(London Child Protection procedures)

Initial scope

A total of 12 cases were reviewed where a conference had been held identified in one month (November 2019). The general finding from this was that there were several cases where health had not been involved in the strategy meeting but participation and contribution to case conferences was acceptable by all agencies and sometimes good. In the cases where core groups had been held, there was satisfactory attendance and participation by other professionals other than Children's social care. A further area of inquiry was considering if participation had changed as the new health visiting /school nurse contract impacted. This review of cases was a snapshot at that point, and the plan was to move on to more in-depth interviews and meetings with involved professionals, and

then compare attendance from different cohorts of cases. Unfortunately, at the end of March the Covid 19 Pandemic and lockdown occurred, and this delayed further progress with this scrutiny exercise.

Virtual Case conferences

Following discussion with the Executive of the GSCP during the lockdown period, it was agreed to change the focus of the scrutiny task and examine the impact that the lockdown and the move to mainly virtual Child Protection Case Conferences had, to inform future practice and make any necessary changes to current arrangements. To complete this work, I met virtually with a group of Child Protection Chairs (CPCs) to ascertain their views and experiences. I looked at a further 15 cases where case conference that had been held during lockdown and were held virtually, by reviewing the minutes of the meeting, as I was unable to access FWi remotely. Through the CP chairs 9 parents were identified who might be prepared to speak with me about their experience. In order to gain permission to speak with them, letters were sent requesting consent to take part in the review, but none responded. I then proactively contacted all nine by phone, several times and left messages, but only managed to directly speak with two parents. I also spoke with two advocates from the Independent Advocacy service in Greenwich, who work with parents with learning disabilities, about their experiences supporting families. They were able to speak about the direct experiences of 8 families that they supported during the lockdown period. I also referenced a piece of research with a similar focus and with many comparable findings. This piece of work built on the work of Dr Mary Baginsky of King's College London, which looked at the experience of 15 local authorities in England. Nuffield Family Justice Observatory then commissioned her to carry out a study on how the running of child protection conferences has been affected by COVID-19. Twenty-four parents and 492 professionals responded – 17% per cent of whom were social workers – with respondents from 108 of the 151 local authorities in England and 16 of 22 in Wales.

Following lockdown in Greenwich all Child Protection Conferences were moved to be virtual/ online. Some CP chairs initially found difficulty getting used to using the technology and there were a number of difficulties associated with getting used to using the virtual model, but on reflection the CP chairs had got used to using this as a way of working – the situation had accelerated their learning as that was the only method available. Some chairs missed the face-to-face contact and when the strict lockdown was relaxed there was the opportunity to go into the office and chair meetings with the Social worker and family, however it would appear out of the chairs spoken to, only one had used this. Some parents had also been able to attend conferences alongside social workers or through using school's technology.

In the national research a similar picture emerged, responses suggested that conferences were mainly being conducted over video or by phone, or occasionally as 'hybrid' meetings, where some people attended in person. There were also reports of conferences that were replaced with a series of bilateral telephone conversations without the opportunity for families and professionals to discuss concerns together.

Nearly half of professionals in the national consultation thought that the new virtual conferences were better than being in the same room. This was not the same experience in Greenwich, though all saw the necessity of the virtual meetings, I believe the general view of the CP chairs was that the negatives outweighed the positives, especially for the families involved, though anecdotally professionals who were involved were generally more positive. I did not speak with any other professional group besides the CP chairs. Certainly, this view was reflected by the Advocacy service that felt that families were disadvantaged by the virtual meetings. One mother I spoke with liked the

virtual meetings as she felt that people were not all looking at her, the virtual nature meant that the focus was dissipated. She was just one face on the screen rather than everyone's focus being on her. Though this could be perceived as a positive there could also be disadvantages in this, as often the direct focus and reality of a conference makes the situation 'real and earnest' for some parents who may not have taken it seriously previously. Professionals reported concerns that the online format meant that the seriousness of conferences was not always conveyed to parents. Others commented that parents had the option during remote conferences to keep their cameras off and engage less – or turn their phones off altogether and, as a result, possibly not receive the messages from the conference clearly enough.

The national picture emphasised the practical benefits to professionals of remote working. The cutting out of travel time, parking and childcare worries has made conferences less of a strain on busy working days. Video or phone sessions also tended to be shorter and more efficient than traditional meetings, with more preparation done in advance. The knock-on effect of this, and one of the significant advantages identified, was increased attendance by a range of professionals. A historic challenge for child protection conferences has been their ability to engage those outside of children's services in a consistent way. Almost half of the professionals interviewed said they had noticed a change in attendance, especially amongst GPs, paediatricians, CAMHS workers and psychiatrists working in adult mental health services. The ability to have a more holistic view can only be a good thing. This was also reflected in Greenwich conferences where attendance of all professionals was improved, and CP chairs reported greater involvement of previously absent fathers. There was also the view that children were more comfortable with virtual communication and many preferred it. The conferences I reviewed all evidenced children's views, some very comprehensively with most being contacted prior to the conference. The mothers I spoke to said their children had been spoken and their views sought prior to the conference. It was not clear from the minutes whether any children had had an opportunity to participate in the virtual conference. Anecdotally more children during the first lockdown took part in child protection conferences if they were not attending school.

Technology

The biggest issue raised by CP chairs, parents and the advocacy service was the access to appropriate technology to support the virtual meeting for families. As already stated, some chairs struggled with using the virtual model as well as having the remote access /equipment to support this. This was more acute for parents who may only have a phone to conduct the meeting on and may not have or be able to afford the necessary access to Wi-Fi necessary to facilitate a long meeting. I also understand that Microsoft Teams requires access to Chrome which some parents may not have or have the ability to set up. It was reported that supporting parents to ensure that they could access and use the necessary technology was often seen as an afterthought in arranging a conference; Social workers often thought it was the responsibility of the advocacy service – which it is not. The advocacy service raised that in their experience sometimes invitations were sent out late, so this also impacted on preparation for the conference.

Examples were given as part of this review of parents losing connection and missing parts of the conference, as even though it was identified in the conference, it was unclear how much had been missed. The Advocacy service also raised the difficulties of the group of parents they work with being able to concentrate for the duration; if face to face the advocates could ask for a break but it was difficult to establish how well the parents were following the meeting. There were also other considerations such as use of an interpreter, which is further complicated by the virtual nature of the meeting. Conference chairs also talked about establishing ground rules and managing difficult

people who could dominate conversations or one example of a father who refused to leave a meeting, which was more difficult virtually.

In the National research, eight in ten professionals identified advantages for parents and family members of the format – although slightly more (85%) also identified disadvantages. Some felt that virtual conferences were less intimidating for parents. However, even though it was a small sample of parents, they all said they would have preferred a face-to-face conference. Most parents in the study had had to join conferences by phone even when professionals had joined by video, with agreement that this left them at a significant disadvantage. Some said they had found it difficult to follow the discussions and to know how and when to contribute, with many saying they had not felt able to express their views or had not felt listened to.

The two parents I spoke to had mixed views, one preferred the virtual model, and one did not. The advocacy service said in their experience families struggled with the virtual nature, lost concentration, and often found it difficult to engage or participate.

It was clear from the feedback that lack of access to the appropriate technology puts parents at a considerable disadvantage.

It was suggested that one way around this was to provide tablets with Sims cards to provide internet connection and with Teams already loaded which could be loaned to the family for the duration of the meeting. I understand that Bexley is using this model which means that families are on a 'level playing field' at least with the technology. I understand that Greenwich were meant to have access to a couple of tablets for the reasons mentioned above but to date these had not been available. I also understand that the service has been asking for the conference rooms to be set up as video conferencing suites since April and understood this was underway in September and some of the work started but is still not complete. This has been chased recently- this would give the option to invite parents without IT access into the building.

Reports

It is a requirement that the social worker should share the report for conference with the parents at least 24 hours in advance of the meeting, to ensure that the parents have access to the report, understand it and the recommendations and have time to prepare. It is also good practice for other agencies to share the reports provided for conference in advance with the parents for the same reason. These issues have always been problematic and the GSCB did a piece of work looking at agencies sharing reports with parents several years ago. This issue has been made worse by the lockdown and the virtual nature of the meeting. CP chairs acknowledged that there were less reports provided but that may be because agencies were attending in person.

The parents I spoke with said they did see the SW's report before but not other agencies.

The Advocacy service said that often with the virtual nature of the conference they do not have access to the CP report prior to conference. Before lockdown they would have access to the report sent to the family. They have been asking SW to send them a copy and they were clear it was not reluctance to do, so but it was being able to send the document confidentially either through Egress or password protected, as many SWs did not have the technical expertise to know how to password protect a PDF document.

Sharing the report with parents is more than just sending them a copy, so I suggest that the planning of the conference is a joint exercise with the CP chairs to ensure that parents have the right technology and can plan the best way to engage and support the family ahead of the conference to

ensure full engagement and participation, as well as sharing reports. This maybe something that can be covered by the CP chairs in the pre-meeting, but this may have to be planned before the meeting rather than directly before. I also suggest a quick 'basics' guide about how to share documents and /or additional support from admin.

Safety concerns

Some very serious concerns were also raised about safety. Conference chairs have no way of knowing who else might be present in a parent's home, however CP Chairs do try to check this out before the conference. Children could be exposed to information that they should not hear, in the National research there was an example given of a child arriving home halfway through a conference when it ran on past school hours – or discussions could potentially be overheard by someone who had been identified as a risk to a child, or, in domestic abuse cases, a danger to a parent.

Chairs also reflected that the discussions were happening in their homes and ensuring that confidentiality was maintained while their own children were in the house. It also blurred the boundary between work and home with difficult and complex issues being discussed. This could impact on Chairs' mental health, as there was no cut off and issues being 'left' in what would have been a 'safe' domain. Chairs in Greenwich assured me that their managers had been very supportive and offered debriefs, regular catchups and supervision – recognising the difficulties of the virtual nature of the role and the possible impact on staff.

Loss of relationship-based practice

Relationship-building is at the heart of social work practice and is incredibly hard to maintain without face-to-face interaction. The impact of the loss of face-to-face communication within child protection conferences displayed itself in different ways. Many of those responding to the National study thought that conferences had suffered as a result of reduced face-to-face interaction, in what could become very sterile environments, where there were fewer opportunities to discuss and reflect. There was also some concern that, although conferences might be shorter, they were lacking detail and potentially taking what were labelled as 'shortcuts'. Parents were often having to deal with other distractions such as lack of child care or having the TV on to distract the child .

Parents listening to difficult and often painful information could be doing so alone at home without support, while professionals seemed more comfortable imparting information in a more direct way than if they were face-to-face with parents, this could also be problematic when no one was physically on hand to talk parents through difficult discussions.

In the National research there were examples of attempts to tackle these issues, with examples of social workers going into the family home, although this practice varied within and across local authorities. Where this had happened, interviewees generally reported positive feedback. However, the ability to do this was impacted by decisions taken by agencies and teams, and the understandable willingness of individuals to attend face-to-face meetings. In Greenwich phone calls to check in with the family after a conference were held as well as help from advocacy services to ensure parents understood and were also supported following the outcomes of the conference.

Managing tensions

It is recognised that parents and families negotiating difficult times in their lives can feel resentful – and sometimes angry – at the presence of social workers in their lives. Child protection conferences can be a particular pressure point, and a moment when professionals sometimes have to draw on their skills to restore calm.

Most of the conference chairs interviewed referred to incidents where parents had become distressed or angry to the point that they left telephone or video meetings and, unlike in face-to-face conferences, no one could go out to try to draw them back in.

However, some professionals found the new mediums easier when engaging with parents they found challenging, especially where they had concerns about their safety. As above if these situations are happening within your own home it can be distressing for some chairs.

Conclusion

The child protection system has been under considerable strain this year, along with other services for children. Enormous effort has been put in place to ensure the continuation of existing systems and processes to help keep children safe. However, before a permanent shift to virtual child protection conferences is made, we need to consider the implications as this move would represent a fundamental shift in practice. I understand that hybrid models are being suggested by some as a way to overcome the challenges of parent participation, while keeping hold of advantages, primarily the engagement of a broader range of professionals.

But only by listening to those who are experiencing the system can we make informed decisions about more permanent solutions. Any long-term changes to practice must be underpinned by the evidence about, and consideration for, the impact on families and children as they would at any other time. On balance I believe that there are more negative implications for families and the virtual nature of the child protection conferences has highlighted and exacerbated disadvantage. It is appreciated that while lockdown continues the need to keep staff and families safe is an important consideration and make several recommendations below which I believe will help and support the service to make case conferencing more accessible and address some of the difficulties highlighted. When we are able to return to more face-to-face meetings, consideration needs to be given to how some of the advantages can be maintained while addressing the disadvantages of virtual meetings.

Recommendations

Provide there are sufficient tablets with Sims cards to provide internet connection and with Teams already loaded which could be loaned to families for the duration of the meeting.

Set up video conferencing in meetings rooms to ensure some form of hybrid model can be used to ensure that parents can engage and participate fully in meetings and continue wider participation of professionals.

Ensure that all social workers receive basic instructions to ensure that they know how to protect a document to ensure confidentiality.

Remind all professionals/agencies of the need to share reports with families prior to conference and in good time.

Reiterate the need for greater communication between SW and CP chairs to ensure families are prepared for conference, especially ensuring ability to access appropriate technology.

Ensure that SWs/ CP chairs continue to contact parents immediately after conference to ensure wellbeing and that they fully understand outcomes.

Work with schools to provide access to video conferencing facilities during school time, so that children could participate in meetings and then return to lessons, so they do not have to miss extended periods of schooling.

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Independent scrutineer December 2020

Appendix

Questions asked of parents:

- Do you have access to a laptop or ipad or did you use your phone, what about internet access?
- Were you offered help about virtual access?
- Did your SW or the CP chair explain the process to you prior to the conference
- Did you have a chance to read the reports before the conference - SW and any others?
- Was this your first experience of a CP conference – how was it for you?
- If second what was the difference? better or worse.
- Did you feel you were able to say what you needed to – did you feel were listened to? Was this more difficult virtually?
- Were your children's views taken into account – were they spoken to /part of the conference?
- What would make it better for you?