Review of Strengthening Families Case Conference Model for Croydon Children Safeguarding Board

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- **Key Findings include:**
- There is positive feedback from parent’s and multi-agency professionals on conferences
- Conference chairs’ knowledge of individual families and their key role in meetings is recognised and valued
- The whole systems approach of Strengthening Families Framework (SFF) is primarily embedded in child protection conferences only
- Practice overall is inconsistent affecting the quality of the parent/child’s experience, meetings, plans and core groups (identified in earlier audits and reviews)
- Staff turnover within agencies, particularly social workers and managers, since implementation in 2013, is an ongoing factor affecting quality
- Management information and quality assurance arrangements need to be better co-ordinated to inform continuous improvements.
- More effective communication and varied approaches to learning is needed to assist cultural change

1. **Background to Review**

1.1 In spring 2013 the Croydon Safeguarding Children Board (CCSC) implemented the Strengthening Families Framework Model for Conferences, which was developed out of the Signs of Safety model of practice developed by Steve Edwards and Andrew Turnell on ‘Signs of Safety’ (1999). ‘The Strengthening Families Framework (SFF) supports the multi-agency to formulate a Child Protection Plan that addressed the identified risk and concerns and the child’s developmental needs in a timely manner which is outcome focussed, and is designed to help families participate more easily.’

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2 SFF Guidance for CP Chairs August 2014

Draft 2 21/09/2016
1.2 In November 2013, Reconstruct undertook an independent review of the Model six months after implementation. Feedback at that time was positive, but the review found children were not being fully involved in the process, some reports were late and some conferences too long.

1.3 In January 2015 an audit of Child Protection Plans was undertaken, this concluded that Child Protection Plans were generally of an appropriate standard and a number of areas for development were set out in an action plan.

1.4 In January 2016 improvement plans based on the findings of the review and audit identified some outstanding areas for development, and some of which are included in the terms of reference for this review, discussed under 2.2.

1.5 During this same period from 2013 Croydon Children’s Social Care is on ‘a journey of transformation’\(^3\). This has two major strands, training of staff in systemic family therapy, which has focused in the first three year contract on Independent Chairs, the new Consultant Practitioner role, social workers and some managers. Secondly, a new model of social work and social work management for the borough. The consultant practitioner roles in the new social work units bring intensive support and reflective clinical supervision to social workers.\(^4\) The Croydon model is based on the Reclaiming Social work model.\(^5\)

2. **Methodology**

2.1 The author of this report is an independent social work consultant with a background in Child Protection, Quality Assurance and Performance Management, Multi-agency working and Training and Development.

2.2 This further independent review was commissioned, in July 2016 to report by September 2016. The Terms of Reference (TOR) set out the need to review progress from earlier improvement plans and issues identified, and this review should involve practitioners and parents; and observe a sample of Child Protection Conferences; identify any themes or areas for development and make recommendations for any cultural change based on the findings. Whether the Strengthening Families Conference Model has made a sufficient difference to the quality of the child/parent’s experience, the meeting and the plan are issues raised by professionals. (TOR 1.4)\(^6\).

\(^3\) ASYE Social Worker in Croydon, [www.lgjobs.com](http://www.lgjobs.com) February 2016

\(^4\) ASYE Social Worker in Croydon, [www.lgjobs.com](http://www.lgjobs.com) February 2016

\(^5\) Reclaiming social work? An evaluation of systemic units as an approach to delivering Children’s Services University of Bedfordshire June 2013

\(^6\) CSCB Strengthening Families Framework Audit Terms of Reference

2 Draft 2 21/09/2016
2.3 A mixed methods approach was chosen, as the most efficient and effective way to collect a range of quantitative and qualitative data for analysis, to triangulate the findings.

2.4 ‘Focus group research involves organised discussion with a selected group of individuals to gain information about their views and experiences of a topic.’ Focus groups were selected as the most effective option, within the timescale, to gain views from several perspectives about the effectiveness of the Croydon SFF conference model. Five focus groups were held, with a total of 25 participants representing professionals from statutory and independent organisations, Chairs, Social Work Unit Managers, Social Workers and Minute Takers. The participants represented a cross section of those involved in the process.

2.5 Schools and some agency professionals were unavailable to participate directly through the focus groups because of the holiday period. However, professionals’ feedback from 2014 to March 2016 identifies of the 101 responses, 41% response from schools/education and 43% from health professionals. A further 8 responses were collated from March to July 2016 from the multi-agency network and fed into the review.

2.6 A range of Croydon written documentation was made available to the author at different times during the review (Appendix 1). Practice and evaluations of Signs of Safety and SFF from practice elsewhere was read. The author also spoke with the Systemic Family Therapist, a health employee based in children’s social care, to understand the context within which social care operate.

2.7 The review also included non-participatory observation of four cases conferences, with parental permission, and chaired by different Independent Chairs. They covered three initial conferences (one a transfer in) and a first review conference (Appendix 2).

2.8 A random case file audit of 31 children, from a list of 343 children with a child protection plan in July 2016 was undertaken (Appendix 3), and included different ages, genders, ethnicity, category of abuse and length of registration. In addition to the random sample of 26 children; 5 children from conferences observed by the report author and one conference, which was cancelled on the day, were also audited. The audit tool previously used for the audit on child protection plans was used for consistency, and adapted slightly by the author for this review to gather additional information.

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7 Gibbs Dr. A Focus Groups Social research update University of Surrey Winter 1997

Draft 2 21/09/2016
2.9 It was not practical for the author to consult enough families in a planned and meaningful way in time for the review. To ensure families were provided with the opportunity to feed their views into the review, it was agreed the Independent Chairs would seek parental feedback using the existing form for a period during this review, and 14 parents responded. Earlier feedback collected from parents was requested by the author, but was not available for comparison as the systems for collation of feedback had recently changed. Young people did not feed their views directly into this review.

3. Findings:

3.1 The benefits of the Strengthening Families Model, when working effectively, are clearly recognised and valued by professionals. There is agreement on what good practice looks like within different parts of the system, but poor communication and information sharing for professionals, has led to assumptions based on individual and agency experience about how well practice is currently working, which is not always based on the facts.

3.2 A range of management information, performance data, feedback and audits are already in place, but not joined up to inform continuous improvements. The Chairs’ monitoring form collects valuable data at each conference, which currently does not appear to be regularly analysed and reported up.

3.3 The main area of concern identified is the inconsistent practice. This is a theme already identified in earlier audits and discussed further from 3.10. This inconsistency is having a negative impact on the quality of the individual parent/child’s experience, and the overall quality and effectiveness of working together through conferences, plans and core groups.

3.4 The SFF fidelity is most adhered to in conferences through the chairing; but the solution focused approach based on strengths and protective factors is not systematically evident throughout the process in core groups or plans.

3.5 Current practice appears to identify one part of the system (conferences) has changed faster and more effectively than the other parts (core groups, child protection plans). Some of the elements need to catch up so the parts work together more effectively. Examples include:

- The involvement of young people over 12 needs to be the expectation and the norm.
- Parents need to understand the importance of arriving 30 minutes prior to the meeting.
The social work conference report template, unlike the NHS Croydon Trust report, has not been revised reflecting the domains of the model; this could assist more critical thinking and inquiry, informed by research to inform strengthening families.

Professionals (as the procedures) need to share their reports before the conference so there are no surprises for parents in the meeting.

A genogram and chronology are available for every conference.

**Good practice**

A good quality meeting is where the parent/family arrive half an hour early to meet with the chair; is quorate, starts promptly; the social work report and other reports are available in advance (within timescales) for Chair’s preparation time, and for parents; both current and receiving social workers are present and receiving manager (at initial), receiving social worker has met the family in advance of meeting, the chair has a facilitative style to relax the family to participate in a genogram at the initial conference, and outline SMART plan, with the meeting lasting around two hours, with sufficient time on to focus on information gathering and analysis and formulating the plan.

3.6 The quality of the meeting benefits from the transparency and openness of information being visually displayed and the more informal layout of the meeting room. This continues to be the main benefit seen by professionals to help families to engage and provide more clarity for professionals as well. Whether the information in the domains was typed with bullet points and simple language or handwritten and more descriptive, was seen as having a potential adverse effect in participation, for a parent who may have a learning disability or English was not their first language.

3.7 The pivotal role of the Conference Chairs, their knowledge of individual families and chairing skills are valued and a recognised strength. There were, concerns expressed about the effect of the Chairs’ different styles, and in some instances over reliance on their role to lead and drive the process.

3.8 Some individual professionals specifically mentioned the hard work some social workers put in with families and children and young people. There was also recognition by some professionals, of the impact and challenges the effect of the high turnover of staff, in particular, social workers has on practice.

3.9 There was a recurrent theme raised by different professionals, about whether the parental historical concerns needed to be presented in full at every review and not just current concerns, so focus is on progress. It was suggested, if a professional at a review, had not
been present at the Initial Conference, they could have a handout so they had access to full historical information. The two main concerns associated to this were it may hinder parents to participate; and if young people attend their parents may not wish them to have knowledge about their past and it may be inappropriate and insensitive.

3.10 Some young people are attending part of the meeting, and children’s views are always considered, they are not always the direct views from the child or direct observation through practice, although there is evidence on case files of direct work and use of tools to inform this. Whether this is increasing cannot be quantified, as it is not currently collated (although a theme in other reviews), but is still an area for improvement.

3.11 Conferences not starting on time, and/or too long continue to be raised and are causing agencies ongoing concerns. Conferences not being quorate and some being cancelled or postponed at short notice or on the day are an ongoing concern. The Author observed a transfer in conference, already postponed three times, which proceeded, although not quorate, on the fourth attempt. Other conferences planned to be observed during the review were also cancelled. Some cases waiting for transfer out conferences, were raised as a problem, with specific London Boroughs and counties, as being delayed by the receiving authority. All the recurrent themes discussed and below under 3.12 need closer monitoring and reporting up for agencies to take action to improve performance.

3.12 Some other recurrent themes affecting quality still needing to be addressed include:
- Conference minutes are variable in quality and content; minutes are not always able to be on the system promptly, this is affected by the way the social care electronic case system operates in following a set sequence of tasks, for example if a social worker leaves without completing a task. Up to date minutes not on case files, was evident in the case file audit;
- Parents not arriving 30 minutes in advance, (half the parents giving feedback for this review were late),
- Conference reports - agencies’ not producing or not sharing reports in advance of the meeting, as they are not generally available until the day. In some instances no report is available and/or the agency is not represented. This was raised specifically in relation to midwifery and unborn babies (the author observed one conference where this had an impact, as information on an unborn was missing); other feedback also identified some schools and adult mental health.
- Social work reports not being available in advance, and not therefore meeting the standard of 2 days for an initial and 5 days for a review, or being shared with the parent in advance.
• Duty social workers representing a receiving unit, or the allocated worker, continues to affect the quality of the meeting and risk assessment, as they are unlikely to have enough knowledge of the family, who also may not be present.

3.13 Child Protection Plans and Core Group Meetings - There were examples in the audit of clear recording of the review of plans and work to date, and formulating of revised plans, and core group meetings. Also some SMART outline plans agreed in conferences. These findings echoed the audit in January 2015 on Child Protection Conferences and plans, that plans were variable in content; some were more specific and measurable than others and clearer timescales. Some plans still appear task centred, with a number of tasks allocated to the social worker. Recording is variable which does not assist following the process through minutes, core groups and plans.

3.14 One emerging theme was identified that religion (is not collected systematically and was missing in 15 of the case file audits) did not appear to be informing practice, and the impact of diversity, culture and religion for children in a family was not usually explored sufficiently. Cultural issues, except the collection of ethnicity, were not always found to be addressed in the January 2015 audit on Child Protection Conferences and plans. Professionals indicated they may need more knowledge and confidence to feel able to explore these issues in more depth with each family.

3.15 There was some evidence in the audit and from some professionals of a plan not being progressed sufficiently between the initial and first review, with practice improving following the first review. One reason for this may be the timing of the receiving social worker being allocated the case and progressing the work. This is also likely to be one impact of having a change of social worker, when social workers leave.

3.16 The London Safeguarding Children Board procedures and Working Together (2015) do not issue guidance on the use of multiple categories. There are still a number of plans under multiple categories, compared to other local authorities. In Croydon it would appear emotional as a part of a multiple category or emotional as a sole category of abuse is often used where there is emotional harm due to domestic abuse. The random case file identified 23 of 31 children had either a plan with multiple categories which included emotional (12) or a plan with a single category of emotional abuse (11). Clear guidelines and thresholds about the use of multiple categories is an action to be followed up from the review in May 2016.

3.17 Plans under multiple categories (with emotional abuse) and single category (emotional abuse) often for domestic abuse which is prevalent in a number of families, could be an area
used to identify and share good practice for outcome focussed plans. While acknowledging the vast majority of these children who are at risk due to emotional abuse have been subject to a plan for less than 15 months, a short period of time, there are a large number of them. Some of these plans placed an emphasis on the referrals to programmes to address domestic abuse, and could be clearer on the outcomes of what has been learnt and how behaviour has changed and implemented to better safeguard the child, following completion of a programme by an adult.

3.18 The audit looked at a small number of siblings within the random sample and found some good work where individual needs of children are clear, and where the impact of the adult behaviours were explored more than others.

**Good practice**
- Collaborative working to address difficulties in working together, addressed by a proactive social work manager setting up for a set period regular meetings with a school
- Linked Child Protection Chair to a number of social work units for discussion and had used a role play of conference to support learning, which included some ASYEs.
- Student based in Quality Assurance providing advocacy and proactively contacting social workers to support young people over 12 to attend their meetings
- Evidenced in recording of reflective group supervision on some cases in social work units
- The chairs’ ensure fathers are kept on the agenda (where appropriate), and there is evidence in minutes, plans, core groups and case recording.
- Consultant Practitioners’ involvement in cases consistently demonstrates good quality practice and recording in cases.

3.19 **Feedback from 14 parents/family and 109 professionals identified:**
- Parent’s felt the meeting helped them to understand what is needed to change to make things better for their children;
- Both parents and professionals felt parents’ views were listened to very or fairly well during the conference; and
- Both professionals and parents’ felt that professionals identified the strengths within the family.
- The professionals felt the conference focused upon the risks well.
- The majority of children at the Conferences were made subject to a child protection plan, confirming the right children are brought to conference.

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9 Analysis of Data of Children subject to CP Plan May 2016

8 Draft 2 21/09/2016
3.20 The last emerging theme relates to ongoing learning and development. The author understands multi-agency sessions on systemic family therapy were not taken up. Some one day training sessions on Strengthening Families have had to be cancelled through low take. Since implementation in 2013 there has been a substantial turnover of staff in the workforce. The majority of professionals in the focus groups, excluding the Chairs, had not been on training on the model. Some professionals now working in Croydon have experience and/or knowledge of the model from elsewhere, where practice varies. There is no specific input currently for ASYE’s. This indicates a need for a more creative approach to learning and development, and improved monitoring, to ensure the Croydon SFF model is consistently implemented and rolled out, whose principles fit alongside the systemic family therapy model being rolled out within social care. These changes should impact positively on the wider system.

3.21 The Chairs have recently started to have monthly reflective supervision and some social care managers. Consultant Practitioners’ role is to provide reflective practice across a number of units, which can be seen to have a positive impact on casework. However currently there is a challenge as a number of Consultant Practitioner roles are vacant and reflective practice across the units is affected, and a number of social workers who have completed the initial systemic family therapy training have moved on. When the Consultant Practitioner posts are fully staffed, these changes alongside the others should impact positively on the wider system.

**Good practice**

The audit identified a few cases where a social work consultant practitioner’s involvement, as part of the process, stood out in the case file audit. The cases evidenced consistency through the process making it easy to follow: child focused practice, evidence of direct work, with clear, succinct up to date recording on core group meetings, review of plans, statutory visits (announced and unannounced), case notes, summaries and genograms and chronologies; supported by management decisions and supervision on file.

4. Conclusion

4.1 Strengthening Families framework model is a whole systems approach. In Croydon the focus for implementation has been as a SFF Conference model, and the principles and thinking behind the model, have not yet been embedded systematically across the whole system, from early help to statutory child protection. Croydon chose not to implement the signs of safety model on which strengthening families is based, and is not for example using scales.
4.2 The journey of transformation of Croydon Children’s Social Care to a new delivery model of social work and social work management, embedding a model of systemic family therapy will enhance the Strengthening Families Case Conference Model when in place as they are both based on the same principles. The unplanned consequences of high staff turnover has identified the need for succession planning to have a continuous programme of training and refresher courses for front line managers and practitioners and to more successfully find a way for multi-agency involvement to enhance communication and working together.

4.3 A number of agencies do not have coterminous boundaries and their work cuts across a number of other London Boroughs or neighbouring counties. There are a number of families who move into and out of Croydon. There are therefore a number of challenges in embedding a model and for enhancing collaborative working, which has been implemented differently in different places.

4.4 Croydon Children Safeguard Board’s strategic lead has demonstrated improving engagement and consideration of fathers in the SFF conference model, evidenced in thinking and practice. SFF could benefit from a similar strategic approach.

4.5 All parts of the SFF conferencing system do not appear to be working together as effectively as they should. The turnover of staff since the implementation, in agencies and particularly in social care, is one main factor continuing to have negative impact on the quality for the parent/child’s experience, conferences, child protection plans and working together through core groups.

4.6 Cultural change is still required throughout the SFF conference system. Some outstanding actions from the previous review and audits are still relevant and need implementing and need to include some small changes identified through parental and professional feedback, which will reassure families and practitioners they have been listened to. Improvements need to be supported by performance management and an effective communication and feedback loop reporting on progress at regular intervals.

4.7 ‘Croydon is low in comparison to other local authorities for the numbers of children who become subject to a child protection plan for a second or subsequent time.’¹⁰ This provides support that there is likely to have been improved social work delivered to families, engagement of families, improved risk management through more effective assessment and safety planning and benefitted from proactive performance monitoring in this area.

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¹⁰ Analysis of data of Croydon Children subject to a CP Plan May 2016 p.15 children previously subject to a child protection plan

Draft 2  21/09/2016
5 Recommendations

5.1 Recommendations are related to five areas: communication, performance management, learning and development, involving children and young people, meetings (core groups and child protection plans). Outstanding actions in the Audit Action Plan (May 2015) are still relevant to be implemented and need to be followed through, but are not laid out again below.

5.2 Communication

- Croydon Children’s Safeguarding Board need to lead the changes and ensure SFF developments and good practice in agencies is communicated regularly through their newsletter and website.
- Croydon SFF briefings should be available for agency intranets.
- Other learning events for example on serious case reviews should incorporate SFF where relevant.
- Changes as a result of feedback or audits/reviews should be shared.

5.3 Performance Management and Quality Assurance

- The performance management and quality assurance arrangements need to be co-ordinated and reported, to promote a robust culture of improvement through learning.
- Feedback form questions, their timing and distribution need to be reviewed.
- The Chair’s monitoring form is a valuable source of data to quantify some information related to conferences, and ask additional questions.
- Agencies could be asked, when they sign in at conferences to add if they have produced a report and the date available and fed back periodically to agency leads to take action where needed.
- Starting meetings on time and ensuring meetings are an appropriate length needs to be prioritised.

5.4 Learning and development:

- A varied approach to learning through developing a rolling programme of termly multi-agency lunchtime and twilight sessions, focused on areas for improvement examples: exploring issues related to diversity, religion and culture in families; observation skills to enhance the lived experience of children under 2; evidence for domains, risk assessment/grey areas and strength/protective factors.
- Multi-agency workshops for core groups offering systemic family therapy, based around working together on complex cases.
• A SFF induction briefing note (1 side A4) covering key principals and practice standards and signposting to further information, for social work team induction packs and other agencies.

• Consider a linked Independent Chair with a consultant practitioner, having a SFF mentoring/or champion role, linked to the systemic family therapy reflective practice role, across some units, for a set period, to enhance quality of work, including direct work and provide sessions for ASYE.

• A small multi-agency frontline managers/supervisors pilot, with a systemic family therapist, as for Chairs, or time limited Action Learning Sets, to drive the SFF strength and resilience model, to have a consistent influence in plans, core groups and supervision. Evaluate a pilot through monitoring progress on a small number of cases through the process.

• Consideration for the future a multi-agency network for peers reviews for non-participant observation of practice of conferences and core groups.

5.5 Involving children and young people:

• Pilot and evaluate a late afternoon conference slot, for young people to attend after school with a child friendly focus to practical arrangements.

• Provide advocacy support in relation to conferences for young people over 12. Consider using more than source, from existing skilled practitioners working with young people in the Borough.

• Monitor and increase use of direct tools and consultation documents.

• Develop a young people’s feedback system for over 12’s.

5.6 Meetings, core groups and child protection plans – links to 5.3 above

• Social work and agency conference report templates need to be developed to incorporate the domains.

• Genograms need to be started at the beginning of initial conferences with families as part of the family engagement (as the procedure).

• Conference chairs to continue to receive reflective practice, which would include ongoing observation of conferences by a systemic family therapist, to embed a more consistent approach, and minute takers should have named support available.

Sally Goodman
Independent Social Work Consultant
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Bibliography


McElearney Dr A. and Cunningham C. (June 2016) NSPCC Exploring the learning and improvement processes of Local Safeguarding Children Boards A research study Executive Summary


Practice from other areas:
Birmingham
Ealing
Enfield
Gateshead
Hillingdon
Hull
Isle of Wight
Islington
Luton
Medway
Southwark
West Berkshire
West Sussex
Appendix 1 – Croydon Documentation


Child Protection Conference Decision & Monitoring Form

Child Protection Conference Report Template Croydon Health Services NHS Trust

Croydon on line Procedures – Transferring child protection plans, Transfer Protocol, Social Work & social Care Supervision & Consultation Policy Standards and Criteria (June 2015), Initial ICPC, Review CPC

Croydon Children Safeguarding Board website and documentation

Croydon Strengthening Families Child Protection Conferences Guidance/checklist for CP Conference Chairs (August 2014)

Draft study into Strengthening Families Model in Child Protection Conferences reconstruct (November 2013)

Joint targeted area inspection of the multi-agency response to abuse and neglect in the London Borough of Croydon (May 2016)

Quality Assurance, Practice & Performance sub-group Audit Action Plan Monitoring (January 2016)

Questionnaire for Multi-Agency Professionals attending a CP Conference

Questionnaire for Families attending a Child Protection Conference

Safeguarding Audit of Child Protection Conferences and Child Protection Plans in Croydon

Signs of Safety in England UK

Terms of Reference Strengthening Families Framework Audit, CSCB SFF Audit (July 2016)