The Use of the Signs of Safety Approach in Child Protection Case Conferences

A practitioner research project to look at participants’ views of the Signs of Safety approach to Child Protection Case Conferences

Anne Beattie, East Lothian Council

Email: abeattie@eastlothian.gov.uk
# Table of Contents

ABSTRACT

1 INTRODUCTION

2 NATIONAL POLICY

3 EAST LOTHIAN CONTEXT

4 BACKGROUND TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SIGNS OF SAFETY/STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

5 LITERATURE REVIEW

Child Protection Systems

6 SIGNS OF SAFETY

7 THE SIGNS OF SAFETY APPROACH TO CHILD PROTECTION CASE CONFERENCES IN EAST LOTHIAN

Preparation

Before the Meeting

During The Meeting

Following the Meeting

8 RESEARCH PROCESS

9 FINDINGS

Feedback From Professionals

How often do you attend Child Protection Case Conferences?

Did you feel prepared for this new approach to Case Conference meetings? What would have helped to make you feel more prepared?

Did you feel you had an opportunity to express your view?

Did you feel that the Risks were adequately discussed?

Did you think the Child Protection Plan was robust?

Did you feel the family were given an opportunity to express their views?

General Feedback

Feedback From Family Members

Did you feel prepared for the Signs of Safety approach to Case Conference meetings? What would have helped to make you feel more prepared?
Did you feel you had an opportunity to express your views? ........... 27
Did you feel that your views were listened to? ............................. 28
Did you feel respected during the meeting? ................................. 28
Did you feel that risks/danger were discussed fairly? .................... 29
Do you think the Child Protection Plan was going to help change things for the better? ............................................................ 29
Were the right people at the case conference meeting? ................. 30
General Feedback ..................................................................... 30
10  KEY MESSAGES FROM THE FINDINGS .................................. 31
Areas for Improvement ................................................................ 31
  Professionals ........................................................................ 31
  Family members .................................................................... 31
  Service development .............................................................. 32
Strengths .................................................................................. 33
11 CONCLUSION ........................................................................ 33
12  REFERENCES ........................................................................ 35
APPENDIX 1 Check List in Preparation for SOS Case Conferences ... 38
APPENDIX 2 Leaflet For Family .................................................. 40
APPENDIX 3 Information For Professionals ................................. 42
APPENDIX 4 Room Layout ......................................................... 45
APPENDIX 5 Comparison of Case Conferences in East Lothian Before and After the SOS Approach .............................................. 46
APPENDIX 6 Feedback Form – Family Members ......................... 48
APPENDIX 7 Feedback Form – Professionals ............................... 50

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Thanks to: Lisa Shine who carried out the interviews with family members; Sharon Fitzpatrick who gathered the data; Richard Campbell and Julia White for their advice and help; and especially the family members and colleagues who took the time to respond to the request for feedback.
Mentoring guidance was provided by Rhoda Macrae, Research Fellow, University of Edinburgh.

ABSTRACT

Key messages from research show that Child Protection Case Conferences tend to be professionally dominated; parents are passive and ‘tested’ for co-operation; there is insufficient time spent on planning. Family members find Case Conferences traumatic, they feel judged, frightened and excluded, - they do not feel listened to; they feel powerless and do not believe they get the help they need.

Therefore Case Conferences should:

• Have a greater focus on planning; enable families to present their views; ensure all views are grounded in evidence; place a strong emphasis on relationships; reduce power inequalities and build on strengths.

In keeping with messages from research, East Lothian Council decided to implement the Signs of Safety approach for Initial Child Protection Case Conferences in April 2013 to find a more constructive way of working with families and address these issues, in partnership with other involved agencies.

The aim of this research project is to consider the views of family members and professionals regarding the Signs of Safety approach to Case Conferences and whether they believe that the approach is likely to lead to better outcomes for children and young people. 25 Case Conferences were included in the study, 56 professionals from various agencies such as health, police, education as well as social work, provided feedback forms. 14 family members provided feedback forms and 4 took part in interviews. Feedback from both professionals and family members was overwhelmingly positive about the Signs of Safety approach. Case Conferences were felt to be more inclusive, with everyone being given an opportunity to have their say – including family members who reported feeling listened to and respected. Family members and professionals reported that they felt all the risks were discussed fairly and were hopeful about the plans.
This was a small scale study, time limited, and therefore could not consider the impact on children, young people and their families. It looked only at the effect of the approach on the actual meetings.

Signs of Safety is not about procedures and processes but about ways of working in a more positive, collaborative yet realistic and transparent way with families, clearly identifying concerns and risk. The findings of this research project show that it is an approach which does complement the views and messages from research, including Munro; current Scottish legislative requirements and policy documents such as GIRFEC.

East Lothian has now implemented the Signs of Safety approach for all Child Protection Case Conferences and sees this as a first step towards implementing the approach more widely in practice.

1 INTRODUCTION

Signs of Safety, an approach to child protection practice, has been adopted in at least 50 jurisdictions in 12 countries (Bunn 2013). In England, where Child Protection procedures are similar to Scotland, 33 Local Authorities are implementing the approach.

On 1st April 2013 East Lothian Council began the implementation of the Signs of Safety approach to Initial Child Protection Case Conferences, having adapted the approach in an attempt to better meet the needs of East Lothian children and their families. East Lothian is the first Scottish Local Authority to use the approach in Child Protection Case Conferences. This change came from a perceived need to work in a more positive way with families which would result in better outcomes for children and young people, whether this means keeping children safe within their own families or alternative placements. The process of introducing the new approach to Child Protection Case Conferences in East Lothian had begun approximately 2 years before and involved representatives from the other key agencies – police, health and education - at all stages.

An evaluation of the new approach using the “Plan Act Study Do” cycle was used to inform a process of continuous improvement. This research report is a review of the introduction of the new approach, running alongside and using the information from the evaluation process that was undertaken. The aim is to consider the views of family members and professionals regarding the Signs of Safety approach to Case Conferences and whether they believe that the approach is likely to lead to better
outcomes for children and young people. The research report and evaluation looked only at process - the preparation for and attendance at the meeting, not at the outcomes or impact on families. It was recognised that the majority of Case Conferences to be evaluated would be pre-birth or concerning very young children, therefore neither the evaluation nor the research considered the views of children and young people.

The report also illustrates how the Signs of Safety approach to Child Protection Case Conferences does fit into the Scottish paradigm with regard to the legal framework, procedures and policy.

2 NATIONAL POLICY

The Children (Scotland) Act 1995 continues to be one of the primary pieces of legislation governing the scope and responsibilities of Local Authorities towards children. The Social Work (Scotland) act 1968, while amended many times, provides the primary mandate for Social Work intervention in Scotland. The Local Government in Scotland Act 2003 part 2 contains details of the duty on Local Authorities to establish and maintain the process of community planning which will include the scope for developing Child Protection Committees. Part 3 of the Act deals with the power of Local Authorities to enhance well-being and again can be interpreted as being relevant to the establishment of Child Protection Committees. National Guidelines are also informed by policy documents, notably 21st Century Social Work Review – Changing Lives and Getting It Right for Every Child.

The National Guidelines state that:-

"Child Protection Committees will design, develop, publish, distribute, disseminate, implement and regularly review and evaluate clear and robust inter-agency Child Protection policies, procedures, protocols and guidelines. This may be done in conjunction with other Child Protection Committees or as part of cross-authority consortia. Each Child Protection Committee will:

• encourage constituent services and agencies to have in place their own up to- date child protection policies, procedures, protocols, guidelines and other relevant materials;

• ensure all services and agencies have robust whistle-blowing polices in
place and that these are sufficiently disseminated and understood by all practitioners and managers;

- ensure that child protection policies, procedures, protocols and guidelines are developed around existing and emerging key issues, where there is agreement that this is required; and

- publish and regularly review their own inter-agency Child Protection Guidelines, which must reflect National and local policy developments, including GIRFEC (Getting it Right for Every Child) and the arrangements for the management of Child Protection Case Conferences.” (Scottish Government 2010)

The Munro Review of Child Protection was presented to the Westminster Government in May 2011, they accepted all the recommendations from the report, with some provisos. While there has been no national response to this report in Scotland, it is seen as a milestone in informing current child protection practice and attitudes. A recurring theme in her reports is that child protection practice has become more and more defensive and overly focused on procedures and processes so that direct work with children and families has become secondary to compliance with procedures and is leading to the loss of focus on children's needs. She also pointed out that various reforms had taken place because of defects in practice but there is much good practice and research to build on to better protect children and young people. Munro talks about the need for the focus in the child protection system to be on "doing the right thing” rather than "doing things right” (2011:6), a view also considered in Scotland through GIRFEC (2008) and Changing Lives (2006).

3 EAST LOTHIAN CONTEXT

East Lothian is a member of the East and Midlothian Child Protection Committee and is in line with the Edinburgh and the Lothians Interagency Child Protection Procedures. East Lothian is a fairly small Local Authority, approximate population of 101,000, to the South East of Edinburgh. Children’s Wellbeing is constantly looking at ways in which our service to families can be improved, including Child Protection.

The findings of a report for the East Lothian Child Protection Committee (2008) generally reflected positively on Child Protection processes within
East Lothian. It made 4 recommendations regarding Child Protection Case Conferences:

- **Consideration should be given to how parents are supported in preparation for and during Child Protection Case Conferences.** Only 57% of people felt that sufficient consideration was given to their views at Case Conference and several stated that they felt “powerless”.

- **Consideration should be given to ensuring that a family GP or other health professional who knows the family attends Case Conferences.** Only 50% of respondents felt that the right people were present.

- **Consideration should be given to the construction of Child Protection Plans and how these are communicated to family members to ensure that the goals are clear and parental expectations are achievable.** Only 43% of people felt they and their child got the help they needed.

- **It should be made explicit at Case Conferences that parents and carers can make a complaint against the agencies involved if they feel this is appropriate, the process should be outlined at the Case Conference supported by leaflets or other documentation if necessary.”**

A Project Board was set up in 2011, consisting of the Senior Management Team to oversee a 3 year action plan with the aim of improving assessment and planning in Children’s Wellbeing from “very good” to “excellent”. One of the remits of this board was to:

“*Explore the development of other models in conjunction with Multi Agency Research Service (MARS) as an alternative to child protection case conferences in particular in relation to neglect cases*”.

In keeping with the culture of a “learning organisation” as described by Senge (1990), working groups which included front line practitioners as well as senior managers were set up to consider ways forward to improve outcomes for children. Senior managers are keen to involve front line practitioners in any service development recognising this is vital to success, as pointed out by Munro:
"A move from compliance to a learning culture will require those working in child protection to be given more scope to exercise professional judgment in deciding how best to help children and their families." (2011: 5)

In accordance with government guidelines, research and one of the recurring themes in significant case reviews, that all agencies working with children need to work more closely together, other agencies such as health, police and education were included in this process.

Key messages from research (Farmer (1999) Corby, Millar and Young (1996), Campbell (1997), Bell (1996)) show that Case Conferences tend to be:

- Professionally dominated; parents are passive and ‘tested’ for cooperation; there is insufficient time spent on planning

Research also shows that parents feel frightened and excluded - they do not feel listened to; they feel powerless and do not get the help they need.

Therefore Case Conferences should have a greater focus on planning; enable families to present their views; ensure all views are grounded in evidence; place a strong emphasis on relationships; reduce power inequalities and build on strengths.

In January 2012 a multi-agency focus group was held and East Lothian began preparations to implement the Signs of Safety approach to Initial Child Protection Case Conferences. It was recognised that the Signs of Safety approach would not impact on procedures or processes except with regard to timescales. Procedures state that the Initial Case Conference should be held as soon as possible following the interagency referral discussion when the decision is made to go to Case Conference, within 21 days. It was agreed that because of the implementation of the Signs of Safety approach, East Lothian would continue to work to the previous 28 day timescale. This was also in recognition of the extra preparation which would be required prior to the Case Conference. Otherwise Edinburgh and the Lothians Interagency Child Protection Procedures still apply in their entirety and take precedence.
4 BACKGROUND TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF SIGNS OF SAFETY/STRENGTHENING FAMILIES

Signs of Safety as an approach to Child Protection practice was developed in the 1990s in Western Australia by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards working with around 150 front line practitioners. The assumption was that the culture of Child Protection work was one of paternalism. Professionals form a judgement about the nature of the problem, undertake the risk assessment and then decide what the most appropriate course of action will be. This paternalistic model effectively makes the professional the key decision maker. While the power imbalance is unavoidable, such a paternalistic approach may prevent the cooperation needed from families to bring about the necessary change to protect the children. Turnell and Edwards sought to answer the question:-

"How can the worker actually build partnerships with parents and children in situations of suspected or substantiated child abuse and still deal rigorously with the maltreatment issues?" (Turnell and Edwards 1999:2).

Signs of Safety is a solution and safety oriented approach to Child Protection casework based on the principles of Brief Solution Focused Therapy (De Shazer 1985; Berg 1994) which recognises the power imbalance between families and professionals in a Child Protection situation. The approach is constantly evolving; one unchanging principle is that it seeks to” cooperate with the person, not the abuse“ (Turnell and Edwards 1999:33). Underpinning the approach is the belief that there are several perspectives for every situation and professionals need to keep an open mind to different points of view and interpretation rather than assuming their view is always correct. Once professionals believe they know the truth about a situation working relationships with other professionals and family members, who may very likely all hold different positions, can be fractured. There can also be a tendency for the professional to stop thinking critically and exclude or reinterpret any new information that does not confirm their original position. (English 1996). As Munro says:

"The single most important factor in minimizing error (in child protection practice) is to admit that you may be wrong“ (Munro 2002: 141).
Building on the ideas of Signs of Safety, Restorative Practice and Family Group Conferencing, the Olmsted County Child and Family Services in Minnesota developed Family Case Planning Conferences in 2000. The aim of these meetings was to reach agreement in contested Child Protection cases which were already in the Court system. Rather than the information sharing process concentrating on the risk and harm it also looked at strengths and protective factors within the family – a strengths based approach. In 2002 a participant survey suggested that the approach had been highly successful in fostering a collaborative approach. Families said they felt respected, listened to and relevant to the process. Professionals reported increased collaboration resulting in the earlier delivery of services and interventions. In two years, 45 Case Planning Conferences resulted in 100% settlement rate prior to the return to court. (Griffiths & Roe 2006).

In 2005 West Berkshire Council Children’s Services worked alongside Olmsted County Child & Family Services to develop a model for Child Protection Conferences, building on the Signs of Safety approach and based on the Minnesota Family Case Planning Conferences. This resulted in a model for Child Protection Case Conferences known as the Strengthening Families Framework and consists of the following broad stages:

- **Preparation meeting(s) with key family participants either in their homes or before the conference begins**

- **Introductions and an ‘ice-breaker’ session in which the family help to create their own genogram on a white board at the front of the room**

- **An information sharing session in which families, as well as professionals, are encouraged to share information and views and in which the ‘Strengthening Families’ framework is completed under the five headings: Danger/Unmet Needs, Risk Statements, Complicating Factors, Strengths/Protective Factors, Grey Areas**

- **Development of a plan outlining the ‘next steps’: actions needed in order to ensure sufficient safety for case closure. Responsibility and timescales for each of these actions is documented.**

The registration decision can be taken at the end of the third or the fourth stage. (Griffiths & Roe 2006)
LITERATURE REVIEW

Child Protection Systems

“Child protection work involves working with uncertainty: we cannot know for sure what is going on in families; we cannot be sure that improvements in family circumstances will last. Many of the problems in current practice seem to arise from the defensive ways in which professionals are expected to manage that uncertainty. For some, following rules and being compliant can appear less risky than carrying the personal responsibility for exercising judgment.” Munro (2010:8)

Burgess et al (2012) agree with Munro that the systems have become overly bureaucratic and anxiety ridden which places barriers to children receiving coordinated swift responses. Burgess et al (2012) also say that the forensic nature of Child Protection makes it more “clumsy when it comes to dealing with sustained problems rather than one-off events” (2012:20) although it is recognised that chronic neglect has a significant effect on children’s development. According to Scottish Government statistics, neglect was the most common concern, accounting for 37% of children placed on the Child Protection Register (2012).

The conflict in Child Protection practice between providing a high professional standard of risk assessment while making and sustaining relationships with families and fulfilling the procedural requirements presents a very real dilemma for workers and organisations.

“Social Workers cannot be expected to implement policies which promote child welfare perspectives without recognition of government and organizations of the inherent contradictions in the state’s relationship with the family which while subjugated at policy level, are unavoidably expressed at practice level” (Spratt 2000:11)

Munro looks at the systems approaches being used and the need to think about the whole as well as the parts. She describes two approaches to Child Protection work, atomistic and holistic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Atomistic Approach To Child Protection</th>
<th>Holistic Approach To Child Protection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nature</td>
<td>Nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Narrow: tending to concentrate on</td>
<td>• Broad: elements seen as standing in relation to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perspective</td>
<td>individual parts or elements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Isolated ‘problems’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Cause & Effect       | • Looking only at immediate and/or proximal effects  
                       | • Short chains of causality            | • Separated in space and time:  
                       |                                    | • Long chains of causality, ripple effects, unintended consequences, feedback effects |
| Style of Recommendations | • Regulation and compliance         | • Strengthening professionalism          |
|                      | • Technocratic                      | • Socio-technical                        |
| Results (observed and sought) | • Narrow range of responses to children’s and young people’s needs  
                       | • Defensive management of risk          | • Requisite variety in responses to meeting children’s and young people’s needs |
|                      | • Command and control management; frameworks and procedures; squeezing out professional discretion  
                       | • Compliance culture                   | • Acceptance of irreducible risk         |
|                      | • Focus on standardised processes, frameworks and procedures  
                       |                                         | • Supportive and enabling management    |
|                      |                                    |                                         | • Learning culture                      |
|                      |                                    |                                         | • Focus on children, their needs, appropriate pathways beneficial outcomes |

(Munro 2010:13)

The holistic approach described is well suited to Signs of Safety - a solution focused, strengths based approach to Child Protection practice which requires professionals to build honest, respectful and sustainable relationships with children, young people and their families while also identifying and addressing suspected or substantiated harm/abuse and potential risk. The importance of relationships between professionals and family and between professionals themselves was also stressed in Messages from Research (1995).
Munro (2012) states there are promising signs that new ways of thinking and working are being encouraged which would improve services for children, there are still a number of reforms required. She was advised of 24 Local Authorities who had a strong interest in using the Signs of Safety approach, 12 boroughs which intended to implement the approach in 2012, more intending to begin implementation in 2013. She states that world-wide international evaluation data from jurisdictions implementing the approach consistently show that practitioners welcome it, show increased morale and pride in their work and there is evidence of a reduction in statutory intervention.

One fundamental change needed, identified by Munro (2012), is for realistic expectations of how well professionals can protect children and young people. She believed that this will encourage professionals to have confidence to use judgement instead of applying rules and “the humility to reflect on weaknesses in their practice so that they can learn.” (Munro 2012:4). Both Munro and Burgess stress the importance of early and preventative services, agencies working together - including services to adults since they can improve the quality of parenting the child receives. They recognise the constraints in the current financial climate but say there is a strong need for robust training and ongoing development, including supervision and coaching.

While researchers, including Munro and Burgess, talk about the need to work collaboratively with families, they also uniformly recognise that it is essential to be upfront and honest about the concerns and professionals do need to be authoritative in the focus on protecting children and young people – the use of “skillful authority”. Both Burgess and Munro argue that the increased bureaucracy and strict adherence to timescales can have an adverse on the ability to build relationships between families and professionals and therefore the quality of assessments. McKeowan (2000) calculated that the quality of information influenced change by 40%, the quality of relationships with service users 30%, and the motivation to change 15%. He also calculated that the way forums were delivered and the method of intervention had a 15% effect.

Research suggests that Child Protection Case Conferences spend insufficient time on planning, and the plans are often felt to be of a poor quality with no check on how feasible they are (Farmer & Owen (1995); Bell(1999)). The Conferences tend to be professionally dominated with parents taking a fairly passive role and having little impact on the decision-making which results in them being unwilling or unable to co-
operate. The Child Protection process is seen as a test of “willingness to cooperate” which makes it difficult for families to challenge the professionals. There tends to be little reappraisal of earlier decisions at Reviews ((Farmer (1999); Prince et al (2005)) There is a considerable body of research suggesting that parents can feel powerless, resentful, not respected listened to or actively involved in the processes (Farmer (1999) Corby, Millar and Young (1996), Campbell (1997), Bell (1996)). Overall families tend to feel that something is being done “to them” and not “with them” (ELC 2008). Haringey reported that only 1 in 4 mothers felt the Case Conference was a positive experience, parents felt unprepared, intimidated and judged:

"If families do not trust their social worker, they will play the game of doing what they believe is expected of them but will not really positively embrace change. They will operate in a climate of being ‘observed’ and ‘judged’ - giving little away.” (Davenport et al (2010))

Key messages from research suggests conferences should have a greater focus on planning, enable families to present their views, ensure all views are grounded in evidence and place a strong emphasis on relationships, reducing power inequalities and building on strengths.

6 SIGNS OF SAFETY

Signs of Safety has now been adopted in over 50 jurisdictions in 12 countries. Many of the implementing authorities have undertaken evaluations/research projects into its effectiveness.

The Department of Child Protection in Western Australia began a 5 year implementation of Signs of Safety as a systems wide approach in 2008. Evaluations of Pre-Birth Conferences (2009) and Pre-Hearing Conferences (2011) resulted in several key messages. These messages were confirmed by Skrypec and Idzelis (2012) in their evaluation of 5 participating Minnesota counties using the Signs of Safety approach:-

- families felt more involved with the planning
- families were clear about what was expected, knew what they and others needed to do
- relationships between families and professionals were improved - a positive working relationship between the family and worker is key to successful outcomes for the family, this includes a relationship
where workers withhold judgement, demonstrate respect, listen, are honest and straightforward.

- families feel more supported
- families felt treated with respect
- families felt they were listened to
- focus on the child
- the role of the chair/facilitator throughout meetings is pivotal to their success
- having points written clearly at the time, eg on whiteboard/flipchart paper was helpful to both professionals and family members.

Concerns that were identified included:-

- appropriate venue, seating arrangements
- length of meeting
- setting time that is timely but all relevant persons can attend
- professionals not carrying out what was agreed
- relationships between professionals can be more problematic than relationships between professionals and family members
- all relationships require common use of language, mutual respect, shared focus, information sharing and transparency.

The conclusion from these reports was that Signs of Safety is an effective and significant improvement on previous practice, although as Skrypec (2012), who was focusing on the relationship between caseworkers and families, says, more research is needed to understand the benefits of this approach relative to other practice.

Bunn (2013) points out that there are limitations to many of the studies - many are based only on self-reporting, small samples and carried out or analysed by practitioners. The research available from Local Authorities in England varies from empirical research such as West Berkshire (Griffiths and Roe 2006); Isle of Wight (Parsons 2012); to PowerPoint presentations such as Brent/Haringey/Hackney (Davenport et al 2010). While recognising the limitations of the research available, the key messages and information from these reports are consistent with each other and with the international data.

Family members report that:-

- they feel more respected and involved
- they feel listened to
• they recognise and appreciate positive feedback and attempts to build on strengths
• they are aware of clear goals and what is required of them
• they find mapping the concerns on the wall very helpful
• they feel the approach leads to less conflict between professionals and families

Professionals have overall been enthusiastic about the new approach, they report that:

• they find the new process helpful, more objective and fairer
• the new process allows greater openness, engagement and transparency
• they feel the meetings are more inclusive and encourage participation by family members
• the visual tool of mapping concerns on the wall is very powerful
• they feel the approach results in improved partnership working and more successful outcomes for children
• they feel the plans are SMARTer and built around the needs of the child and family.

Bunn’s own report consisted of a literature review, survey of Local Authorities and feedback from twelve practitioners from six local authorities (2013). Her findings were consistent with the findings from English Local Authorities and international data. She found three key themes:

• Improvements in practitioners experience, skills and job satisfaction. Practitioners had also identified that the tools provided by the Signs of Safety approach were more useful than those previously available to help organise practice, focus on safety/risk and measure change.

• Improvements in relationships between parents and practitioners: relationships being more open and transparent, family members feeling more respected and not feeling blamed which also led to more positive views of professionals.

• Greater involvement of families in the process: studies reported participation from families, more recognition of change and more optimistic views of capacity to change from both professionals and family members.

Some concerns have been identified by professionals and family members in the various reports:
• **The length of meetings**

• **Some professionals were anxious that the Chair retain sufficient formality**

• **Some professionals felt that allowing families the opportunity to participate more and challenge professionals at times disempowered them in challenging families and addressing the risks**

• **Some professionals noted that conferences were sometimes convened at too short notice so that insufficient information and incomplete assessment was brought to the Case Conference**

• **Some professionals identified a need for further training, in the wider philosophy behind the approach, as well as the impact on meetings**

• **There were some concerns about the difficulty of recording information and obtaining a record afterward i.e “capturing” the visual recording of points on the walls which was felt to be very valuable.**

• **Some family members worried that professionals would not carry out the actions agreed in the plans**

One other, significant concern that has been expressed by professionals is the possible conflict between building positive relationships with family members and being rigorous about identifying and addressing the harm and risks. Bunn points out that Turnell, addresses this:

"the concern is that when a professional builds a positive relationship with abusive parents that professional will then begin to overlook or minimise the seriousness of the abuse. The literature describes such relationships as ‘naïve’ (Dingwall, 1983) or ‘dangerous’ (Dale et al. 1986; Calder 2008)“Turnell (2012:9).

Bunn also recognises the association of the approach with the baby P case. She quotes Turnell:

“Solution focus gives you a lot of good skills, it gives you ways of engaging with families”, he told the programme. “But you must bring to the table very clearly what the problem is and you must talk very clearly with the family about the past, about harm to the child, the neglect, the maltreatment. And if you try and use solution focus without doing that, if you try and use it as a therapy, as a therapist would use it in the therapy room, it can very quickly become dangerous – particularly in high risk cases.” “If you are talking about the future without reference to the past, that’s when it can get very dangerous in child protection work.” (From BBC website on report of Panorama programme 2009. Panorama Baby P: The Whole Truth? 4 May 2009)
Bunn agrees, saying this is one of the differentiating factors between solution focused brief therapy and Signs of Safety, the protocol and Assessment and Planning form have specific categories to record danger and harm and the balance between risk and safety is constantly being monitored and assessed.

7 THE SIGNS OF SAFETY APPROACH TO CHILD PROTECTION CASE CONFERENCES IN EAST LOTHIAN.

Preparation

"A good start is half the work” Irish proverb

Informed by the literature, East Lothian embarked on a detailed process of preparing to move to the Signs of Safety approach to Child Protection Case Conferences. A Signs of Safety operational group was formed consisting of representatives from social work, health, police, children 1st and education. This group had responsibility for the implementation of the Signs of Safety approach to Child Protection Case Conferences. It was answerable to a multi-agency oversight group with strategic responsibility, with advice and input from a Reference Group which had representatives from consultative groups such as Multi Agency Resource Services, now known as WithScotland, ADSW and the Scottish Government.

Consultancy/training support was arranged for specific multi agency training events, including for prospective chairs and managers from Children 1st, police, health and education. A rolling programme of training and awareness was made available to practitioners in social work and all our partner agencies both around the Signs of Safety approach generally and more specifically how it would affect the approach to Child Protection Case Conferences.

A key message for all practitioners throughout this process was that it was not a paradigm shift but about reconnecting with people. It was also seen as a catalyst to change how we work.

Before the Meeting

It was decided that the process which would best meet East Lothian’s requirements would be that a worker would meet with the family beforehand, complete a family tree/support network with the family
members, agree who should attend and prepare a Danger Statement i.e. a clear statement of why the decision had been made to call a Child Protection Case Conference. These would be given to the Chair beforehand and the Chair would visit the family before the Case Conference and ensure they knew what to expect with regard to the shape of the meeting and their role in it. In practice it was recognised that most of this preparatory work would be carried out with the parent(s)/carer with whom the child was living. It would not be possible to undertake separate visits with all relevant extended family members. Children 1st were enlisted to support workers with this preparation if required, for example to meet family to draw up the family tree, meet extended family members. The decisions about the role of Social Worker/Children 1st worker and Chair in the preparation would be agreed as soon as possible when the IRD was concluded (Appendix 1). Leaflets about the new approach would be sent to all family members and professionals with the invitation to the Case Conference. (Appendix 2,3(a) (b))

One of the most significant issues for all professionals was that it would be even more important that reports be prepared within the timescales set down in procedures i.e. 7 days prior to the Case Conference. This timescale is not always followed for a variety of reasons, but if the reports are not to be gone through or tabled during the meeting it is essential that family members and other professionals have the opportunity to read them beforehand. Should there be any restricted information the Chair must be informed the day before and the family also informed so they know what to expect.

**During The Meeting**

The main difference from the more traditional style of case conference is to make the family feel more at the centre in the hope that family members will find it easier to speak and express their views and be more involved in developing the plan.

The room layout is recognised as being an important element of this (Appendix 4). The room is laid out in a horseshoe shape with all participants able to see the several sheets of flipchart paper which will be displayed on the wall which will include the previously prepared family tree/support network and the danger statement. The use of a white board was considered but so far the preference is to use flipchart paper.
The chair uses flipchart paper to take notes of the meeting, basically under the headings of strengths, risks/concerns and what needs to happen – this will form the basis of the child’s plan. The danger statement can be amended throughout the meeting and focuses on the expected consequences if there is no change in the current behaviour or situation. All participants are also asked about their goals and the desired outcomes.

A decision is made as to whether the child’s name should be placed on the child protection register, if so whether a referral to the reporter to the children’s hearing is appropriate and whether there are any immediate risks to the child and what action is required. The Signs of Safety approach provides for participants to use scaling of risk, but East Lothian decided not to use this tool. If the child’s name is placed on the Child Protection Register a Child Protection Plan will be formulated and arrangements for a Core Group will be made, if not, the plan will be a Welfare Plan. One of the aims in adopting the Signs of Safety approach to Child Protection Case Conferences is that the family will take an active role in drawing up the plans for the child and hopefully be able to say if they disagree with any points or do not feel they will be able to successfully undertake any proposed actions. The plan will therefore be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time bound, all participants being clear of what is expected of them and when.

Following the Meeting

The notes from the flipchart paper form the basis for the minute of the meeting. The worker will visit the family and share the plan in an age appropriate way with the child. The plan will be available to the first Core Group meeting which should be within two weeks of the Child Protection Case Conference.

A Comparison of Case Conferences in East Lothian before and after the Signs of Safety Approach can be found in Appendix 5

8 RESEARCH PROCESS

This evaluation was carried out to consider the views of families and professionals with regard to the Signs of Safety approach to Child Protection Case Conferences.
It is recognised that most family members attending Initial Child Protection Case Conferences, the subject of this project, would have no experience of other approaches to Case Conferences and therefore this was not a comparative study.

The study comprised 25 case conferences:

Family members were approached following their attendance at Child Protection Case Conferences and given the opportunity to offer feedback. 18 family members provided feedback from 13 case conferences:

The feedback form for family members was used as the prompt sheet for the semi structured interviews. See Appendix 6

- 2 took part in visually recorded semi structured interviews
- 2 took part in semi structured interview - notes taken of responses
- 14 returned feedback forms

All professionals were also asked following their attendance to complete feedback forms. See Appendix 7

56 professionals returned feedback forms from 25 case conferences:

- 56 returned feedback forms from 1 case conference
- 3 returned feedback forms from 2 case conferences

9 FINDINGS

The report will first look at the data gathered from professionals; it will then look at data from family members. Representative examples of comments from participants are included.
Feedback From Professionals

How often do you attend Child Protection Case Conferences?

![Bar Chart]

Did you feel prepared for this new approach to Case Conference meetings? What would have helped to make you feel more prepared?

![Pie Chart]

48 of the 56 participants felt prepared for the approach. Those who reported they did not feel prepared for the approach also reported that they had been unable to take advantage of the various training/awareness opportunities.

One participant stated:

- "Until you attend you don't know what to expect. ....best experience is attending one to see how it all works.”
Did you feel you had an opportunity to express your view?

- 58 professional responses indicated that they felt they had an opportunity to express their views:
  - "There was more discussion rather than each professional giving a report"
  - "Everyone had the opportunity to talk – Much less formal atmosphere than previous CPCC"

Did you feel that the Risks were adequately discussed?

All 57 professional responses to this question reported that they did feel the risks were fully discussed:
  - "Issues were fully discussed and explained in straightforward language"
Did you think the Child Protection Plan was robust?

51 professionals reported that they thought the child protection plan was robust:

- “Direct agreement from partners and family regarding who do what”
- “Family had the opportunity to contribute to plan”
- “Having the contingency plan on the same piece of flipchart was significant for the family to see these together”

One participant said the plan was not robust because:

- “it was not discussed due to the length of the meeting, it will be discussed at the core group in two weeks”

Did you feel the family were given an opportunity to express their views?

The 53 participants who responded to this question felt that family were given the opportunity to express their views:

- “Family were more able to express their views in a calm manner without feeling defensive than under the old system”
- “They were specifically addressed and asked their views”
- “The focus was on the family leading the discussion with structured support from the chair”
- “The chair conducted the meeting in such a way that the family took the lead in many ways. Visual notes allows time to reflect”
General Feedback

Participants were asked how does the Signs of Safety approach compared with the former approach to Child Protection Case Conferences, some of the responses:

• "It helps address some of the power balance between professionals and families. It empowers extended family to identify solutions and supports alongside professionals instead of feeling things are being imposed”;
• "Much more interactive, plan felt alive”;
• "it felt like family were the most important contributors”;
• "Easier to follow and address all the salient points and know that they have been easier also for the family to follow”;
• "Opportunity For family to speak with professionals rather than having to listen to reports being read out”.
• "More open and encouraging for the family. More family focused”
• "Focuses the minds of people more on the needs of the child and what is required to keep them safe”;
• "More child focussed”
• There were no responses suggesting preference for the former approach.

Participants were asked how can the Signs of Safety approach be further improved? Some of the responses were:

• "My fear is that people stray from their reports rely on more anecdotal verbal reports and the people at the meeting build a consensus that may sway people and ignore “minority” views”
• "to not forget the prepared conference reports.”
• "Will be refined with practice/experience”
Feedback From Family Members

Did you feel prepared for the Signs of Safety approach to Case Conference meetings? What would have helped to make you feel more prepared?

Family members’ responses were similar to those from professionals, the majority felt well prepared for the approach.

- 18 Family Members participated:
    - 15 said they were well prepared for the meeting but:
      - 3 said they did not have ALL of the reports beforehand
      - 1 was invited at short notice and the process was explained just prior to going into the meeting.

Did you feel you had an opportunity to express your views?

16 of the 18 participants felt they had an opportunity to express their views:

- "It was a two way process"
- "The chair asks everyone for their opinion, if I did not agree I raised my arm if I wanted to speak"
- "The chair put me at my ease"
- "Had a say in what other people were saying"

2 family members did not feel they had an opportunity to express their views:
• "Nobody prepared, people not listening”

• "Discussed concerns with sw on morning of meeting, however this was not discussed within ICPCC.”

Did you feel that your views were listened to?

15 family members said they do feel their views are listened to:-

• "I was being listened to”

• "It was a two way process”

1 participant felt that their views were both listened to and not listened to:-

• "Some things I raised – most of the time the answer was “we are going to focus on the future”

Did you feel respected during the meeting?

14 participants felt respected

• "Used to feel judged, this meeting didn’t judge and improved my confidence.”

• "Understood more, everything broken down for me”

• "I would say so because the chair did not allow anyone to interrupt when someone was speaking”
Did you feel that risks/danger were discussed fairly?

16 family members agreed that the risks had been discussed fairly:

- “Risks made clear, helpful having it written on the wall”
- “Very clear meeting was about the children”
- “They explained that’s how you see it and this is how we see it”

1 participant did not:

- “Struggling with conflicting reports”

Do you think the Child Protection Plan was going to help change things for the better?

15 of the 18 family members thought the plan will help change things for the better

- “It made me a stronger person”
- “In the short term”
- “Looked helpful, and the fact that so many people are involved”

- “It included all the things that should be in there... care plan is about addressing things”

1 with the proviso that:

- “If named professionals keep to plan as agreed with the parents”
Were the right people at the case conference meeting?

14 family members believed that right people were at the meeting:

- "the right people were at the meeting"

BUT

2 said that:

- "people were there who did not know the family"

2 other family members did not feel the right people were present:

- "the doctor should have been there"

- "the meeting was at too short notice for everyone to attend"

General Feedback

Participants were asked their views on how the Signs of safety Approach to Child Protection Case Conferences could be further improved. Some of the responses:

- "Maybe more time for me to speak, this was more inclusive"

- "Reports sent out on time, professionals need to be more prepared.... Systems need to be better linked"

- "Only way in was through the Social Work office, it was like the walk of shame"

- "Stop too many pro folk who just get sent and read old stuff they don’t know"

- "I feel that Social Workers and named professionals require much more training with regards to the pilot"
10 KEY MESSAGES FROM THE FINDINGS

Areas for Improvement

Professionals

A rolling training programme is offered to social work staff and our partner agencies, most professionals did feel prepared, those who did not had not been able to make use of training opportunities. Continuing training opportunities will allow the new approach to develop further, but professionals in all agencies need to take responsibility for making use of these opportunities.

Munro (2012) talks about the conflict between strict adherence to timescales and building good rapport with families, carrying out good quality assessments. Social Workers are anxious about the need to adhere to timescales – the expectation being that they will need to move to the 21 day deadline between Inter-Agency Referral Discussion and Case Conference and the increase to their workload which may become a barrier to them fulfilling their role. Balance is required, as Munro says, relaxing timescales does not remove the need for timely intervention, both timeliness and quality needs to be monitored closely.

Some participants did not feel prepared for the length of time of the meetings, which can be between 2 to 3 hours. This should be made clear when invitations go out.

Some professionals were concerned that the information from reports could be lost during the meeting, resulting in important issues not being discussed.

Family members

Some family members were aware that some professionals could not attend because of the short notice of the Case Conference, another issue around the strict adherence to timescales.

One family member reported not feeling respected, listened to or that the risks were discussed fairly. That family member has since admitted to feeling very angry about what she saw as the injustice of the process from the point she was aware a Child Protection Case Conference was to
be arranged. She felt powerless about the whole process and her comments related to that as much as to the Case Conference itself. It is perhaps a reminder that the Signs of Safety approach is not an easy option for family members, it can be most uncomfortable for them having to take responsibility for past harm and their child’s current and future safety.

Service development

Family members who reported they did not feel well prepared for the meeting complained that they had not received all reports in good time. This is a longstanding, multi-agency issue which needs further attention.

The need for preparation for this approach to Case Conferences is a recurring theme in our research and others. Both professionals and family members appreciated and said the preparation they had received was beneficial. It needs to be recognised that this places pressure on practitioners and support and time are needed to continue to provide a high standard.

Further training would be beneficial, both with regard to the processes relating to Child Protection Case Conferences and the wider philosophy behind the approach. I would suggest that it is the responsibility of professionals to ensure significant information is not overlooked because of the different focus on reports and further training will assist with this.

The core framework and safety planning involved in Signs of Safety is one of the main differences between applying solution focused brief therapy and Signs of Safety. As Turnell says - "for training to make a difference, the ideas and practices must be supported by supervision and ongoing organisational processes that support and embed the new training and practices" (2012:48)

The venue is extremely important. The room needs to be of a size to comfortably hold the number of participants. Some participants asked that there be “comfort breaks” and again, this can be practically difficult if people have to go through busy offices to use the facilities. East Lothian is trying to address this issue, but the availability of venues is limited. The seating arrangements are also important – there needs to be room on the wall for the various papers and all participants need to be able to see them clearly (Appendix 5).
The length of time the meeting takes can mean that the Child Protection Plan is not fully formulated. Balance needs to be reached where the main points are agreed, but participants understand that part of the purpose of Child Protection Core Groups is to amend and update the plan as appropriate, adding the details required.

**Strengths**

There were strong similarities between the feedback from family members and professionals.

83% of family members felt well prepared for the meetings, they appreciated the home visit by the Chair prior to the meeting.

The role of the Chair was a recurring theme. Family members were appreciative of the Chair welcoming them and meeting briefly before the meeting if they had not had a home visit. Professionals and family members agreed that the Chair’s role in ensuring the meeting was inclusive and well-structured was integral to the success of the meeting.

Professionals and family members found the visual aspect of the meeting helpful – the genogram and danger statement on the wall as well as the significant points being written down on flipchart paper for all to see.

Professionals and family members regularly said that the meeting was inclusive; people were listened to; family members were respected; while the meeting is strengths based, all risks and dangers were discussed fully and the plans were robust.

Family Members regularly reported that they did not feel judged, they felt listened to, they appreciated the strengths being recognised and felt more included in the meeting as well as the planning for their children.

**11 CONCLUSION**

Signs of Safety does not look at processes and procedures as such, rather it is an approach to developing relationships and working in partnership with families while ensuring a robust identification of harm and risk and “Safety Plan” to ensure the child is safe. Processes and procedures are required to support the approach. East Lothian is continuing to look at processes, procedures, notably IT to ensure they better support the
approach, e.g. templates used for reports and minutes have been modified, but further work is required.

East Lothian Council, taking into account research and the experiences of Local Authorities in England adapted the Signs of Safety approach/Strengthening Families Framework to meet local requirements and the Signs of Safety approach was introduced on 1st April 2013 for Initial Child Protection Case Conferences and Pre-Birth Case Conferences. As of 1\textsuperscript{st} November 2013 all Child Protection Case Conferences are being carried out using the new approach.

It has to be recognised that this approach is not an easy option for either professionals or family, it can be uncomfortable for families to have to accept responsibility for the past harm and their children’s current and future safety, and it can be uncomfortable for professionals to give up some of the control of the more traditional paternalistic approach.

Feedback from professionals and family members has, however, been very positive. Although this is a small scale piece of practitioner research, the findings are very similar to international research and research from Local Authorities in England. Professionals and family members report that they find the approach inclusive, it encourages collaborative, honest, partnership working. It identifies the harm and dangers clearly and openly while looking at the family’s strengths on which to build to ensure the child is safe. The approach goes some way to encourage and enable professionals to meet the challenges and recommendations from reports such as Munro (2011; 2012). It places the child clearly at the centre – as Munro titled her progress report in 2012 – “Moving towards a Child Centred System”. It also complements the spirit of our legislative framework and policy documents such as GIRFEC.

The use of Signs of Safety in East Lothian will continue to evolve, informed by ongoing evaluation and experience. The use of Signs of Safety in Initial Child Protection Case Conferences was the starting point to implementing the Signs of Safety approach in East Lothian. Drawing on this work, further work is being undertaken regarding the use of the approach in Child Protection Core Groups and in practice more generally.

Turnell and others suggest that a full implementation of Signs of Safety Approach takes around 5 years to accomplish. It is clear, therefore, that East Lothian’s introduction to the approach for Child Protection Case Conferences is only a very promising first step in the journey.
REFERENCES


Davenport J, Luxton B, Peel S 2010 *Strengthening families: a new approach to child protection* London Safeguarding Children Board (Power Point presentation) LSCB

Department of Child Protection (2009) *Interagency Early Intervention Pre-Birth MOU (formerly Project 32a) Final Evaluation Report* Western Australia DCP

Department of Child Protection (2011) *Pilot of Signs of Safety lawyer-assisted Conferences and Meetings Final Report* Western Australia DCP


McKeowan K (2000) A guide to what works in family support services for vulnerable families Dept of Health and Children Dublin


### APPENDIX 1 Check List in Preparation for SOS Case Conferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACTIONS</th>
<th>YES</th>
<th>NO</th>
<th>REASONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ON THE DAY THE IRD HAS CONCLUDED WITH DECISION TO HOLD CASE CONFERENCE:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TL &amp; SW (*and Ch 1st) to meet with Chair of the conf.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Children 1st to be involved with all newly allocated cases and in open cases if felt to be beneficial</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirm the date and time of the conf.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consideration of who should attend in family, inc children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree on who to invite from wider family/friends network</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree on time for Chair to meet with family</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>(Chair to raise issue of ‘restricted access’ information with the family)</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AT THE ABOVE MEETING THE FOLLOWING WILL BE AGREED AND PROVIDED TO CHAIR IN ADVANCE OF THE CONFERENCE:

Family tree and Danger Statement to be completed with the family & given to chair in advance of meeting

Children’s views sought and recorded (using one of the following: viewpoint, Having Your Say, ‘3 Houses’ or Wizard/Fairy). Invite for Child(?)

Consideration of support for children if they are to attend conference

SW report to contain an Interim Safety Plan