

Resolving Multi-Agency Professional Disagreements and Escalation Policy

Contents

1. Introduction
2. Principles of Resolving Professional Disagreements
3. Process of Resolving Professional Disagreements
4. Inter-agency co-operation to prevent conflict in emergencies
5. Child Protection Conferences
6. Following Resolution

1. Introduction

When working in the arena of safeguarding children and young people, it is inevitable that at times there will be professional disagreement between agencies. Whilst this is accepted, it is vital that such disagreements are not allowed to adversely affect the outcomes for children and young people. Professional disagreement is only dysfunctional if it is not resolved in a constructive and timely way. This protocol therefore, provides a process for resolving professional disagreements between agencies.

Disagreements can arise in a number of areas of multi-agency working, as well as within single-agency working, but are most commonly seen in relation to:

- Criteria for referrals;
- Outcomes of assessments;
- Roles and responsibilities of workers;
- Service provision; and
- Information sharing and communication.

Disagreements can relate both to decisions about individual children or specific processes. This protocol focuses on disagreements between agencies in relation to individual children and is applicable to all agencies, including the Voluntary, Community and Faith (VCF) sectors.

2. Principles of Resolving Professional Disagreements

- The safety and wellbeing of individual children / young people remain the paramount consideration in any professional disagreement. Professional disagreements which obscure focus on the child / young person must be avoided;
- Professional disagreement should not always be viewed negatively; it can improve outcomes for children and young people in a timely and sensitive manner, and provide important learning for the practitioners / agencies involved;
- All professionals retain responsibility for their own cases, and their actions in relation to such case work;
- When there are disagreements between agencies, this can be recognised as an opportunity for healthy debate. **The purpose of this protocol is to facilitate the resolution of operational disagreements where an agency considers that, without such action, there would be a negative impact on a child's well-being;**
- **Difficulties at practitioner / fieldworker level between agencies should be resolved as simply and quickly as possible between the practitioners concerned.** If this is unsuccessful, the challenging agency should formally communicate that this protocol will be implemented, and details escalated to the challenging agency's Safeguarding Lead and/ or the practitioner's Line Manager to agree and record;
- It is important that all practitioners respect the views of others, whatever their level of experience and be mindful of the difficulties that challenging more senior or experienced practitioners may present;
- Working together effectively depends on an open approach and honest relationships between individuals and agencies. Teams, services and schools which work together frequently in support of the same children and families find resolving disagreements easier if they have built relationships and know each other by name and face. Working together also depends on resolving disagreements to the satisfaction of workers and agencies, with a genuine commitment to partnership;
- Attempts at problem resolution may leave one worker / agency believing that the child / young person remains at risk of **Significant Harm**. This person / agency is responsible for communicating any such concerns through their line management and/or the Safeguard Leads for the organisations involved.
Please see Appendix A: Escalation Leads
- Disagreements can be resolved at any stage however it is the responsibility of all the agencies involved to achieve the best outcome for the child;

- To avoid delay, it is expected that disagreements will be resolved quickly at the lowest level and, if escalated, with each step in this process not exceeding **5 working days**.

3. Process of Resolving Professional Disagreements

The following stages are likely to be involved:

- Recognition that there is a disagreement over a significant issue in relation to the safety and wellbeing of a child / young person;
- Most disagreements can be resolved through discussion and negotiation. The practitioners involved should attempt resolution within 24 hours;
- A restorative process that allows everyone's perspective on the nature of the problem to be heard;
- Discussion of the possible cause and potential impact of the problem; and
- Agreement on next steps for it to be resolved

Step 1

The process of resolving professional disagreements will initially involve workers consulting co-workers within their own organisation, to clarify their thinking and practice in the first instance, for example, via discussion with the Safeguarding Lead, a [Professionals Only Meeting](#) or other meeting which promotes reflection, using an appropriate practice tool where available, such as the [Threshold of Needs Guidance](#).

Step 2

The following should then be considered as part of the process of resolving professional disagreements:

- a. Initial attempts to resolve the problem will normally be made between the professionals / agencies who have the original disagreement, at the time the dispute is identified, unless the child / young person is at immediate or significant risk. This is best done face to face, or if not possible by phone or skype;
- b. Both agencies will give clear reason(s) for their safeguarding concerns and approach, which should be confirmed in writing and, where required, clearly recorded as a formal challenge, as per guidance from their Line Manager and/or Safeguarding Lead;
- c. It is important to recognise that differences in status and / or experience may affect the confidence of some workers in resolving differences, and some may need support from their Managers and/or Safeguarding Lead.

Step 3

If unresolved, the problem / disagreement is then referred to the worker's own Line Manager or agency Safeguarding Lead (challenging agency), who will discuss the situation with their equivalent colleague in the other agency.

Step 4

- a. If the problem remains unresolved, the Line Manager or agency Safeguarding Lead of the challenging agency will liaise with the relevant Service Manager or refer up their agency line management structure. This may be the management committee if in a Voluntary, Community and Faith sector organisation or Designated Safeguarding Lead who will liaise with the relevant Service Manager.
- b. A restorative conversation will then be organised, to allow the professionals to share their different perspectives and move towards a resolution. Ideally this will involve a face to face meeting. If feelings are running high, a restorative practitioner may be sought to help facilitate the conversation. Action points arising from this process will be formally agreed and recorded.

Step 5

If the issue is not resolved and professional differences remain, the matter **must** be referred to the Heads of Service (or most appropriate management committee member, commissioner or funding body [1]) for each agency involved.

Step 6 In the unlikely event that the issue remains unresolved by following the steps described above and/or the discussions raise significant policy issues, the matter should be referred urgently to the Deputy Director of Safeguarding who will determine a course of action including reporting the matter to the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board Independent Chair. In all cases where it has not been possible to resolve difference and/or where there may be lessons to be learned for future practice, consideration should be given to holding a multi-agency case review. At all stages, it is important that a clear record of the progress of the disagreement is kept by all parties on each agency's child's file. This must include written confirmation between the parties in relation to the agreed outcome of the disagreement and how any outstanding issues will be pursued. Where applicable records of any learning from the disagreement should be shared with the Oxfordshire Safeguarding Children Board, and then collated and considered to aid wider learning and improvement.

It is imperative that this process fits within the child's timescale. Timely action is paramount if there are concerns that a child or young person is at risk.

[1] For example, in the case of a sole proprietor or self-employed individual

4. Inter-agency co-operation to prevent conflict in emergencies

On occasion situations will arise where normal inter-agency planning is unable to ensure the appropriate provision and children's circumstances are unstable as a result. These events require inter-agency co-operation to resolve, e.g. children admitted or unable to be discharged from hospital due to insufficiency of social care placements or specialist services.

In such emergencies escalation leads will problem-solve together on a daily basis to support children and families, finding creative solutions to meet needs and mitigate risks.

5. Child Protection Conferences

5.1 Dissent about Need for Child Protection Conference

The decision whether or not to convene a [Child Protection Conference](#) rests with Children's Social Care Services. However, those professionals and agencies who are most involved with the child and family, and those who have taken part in a Section 47 Enquiry, have the right to request that Children's Social Care Services convene a Child Protection Conference if they have serious concerns that a child's welfare may not otherwise be adequately safeguarded.

Any such request that is supported by a senior manager, or a Designated or Named Professional, will be considered. Where there remain differences of view over the necessity for a Child Protection Conference in a specific case, every effort should be made to resolve them through discussion and explanation.

5.2 Dissent at Child Protection Conferences

If a Child Protection Conference Chair is unable to achieve a consensus as to the need for a [Child Protection Plan](#), they should make a decision and note any dissenting views. This will include the situation where there is no majority view and where the Conference Chair exercises their decision making powers as set out in Initial [Child Protection Conference Procedure](#).

The agency or individual who dissents from the Chair's decision can then consider whether they wish to further challenge the outcome of the Conference using the process set out in this document.

6. Following Resolution

To avoid similar professional conflicts arising again, amendments may be required to local protocols and procedures.

It may also be helpful for individuals to debrief following some disputes, in order to promote continuing good working relationships.

7. Role of escalation leads

Escalation leads are senior representatives of agencies who can exercise authority within their agency to resolve difficulties in respect of inter-agency communication/working to safeguard children. They do not, in all instances, directly manage the services within their sphere of authority, but have a designated responsibility on behalf of the agency to undertake this role.

Contacts should be used where frontline practitioners and managers have been unable to resolve issues via their normal communication routes. Leads may assist by brokering prompt solutions to problems; or by ensuring communication and resolution by fellow managers.

(This procedure has been compiled with reference to West Yorkshire Safeguarding Consortium procedures)

Appendix A: Escalation leads

Contacts for escalation and additional advice

Agency	In-hours (Mon-Thurs 8.30-5.00 Fri 8.30-4.00)	Contact details	Out-of-hours (eves and w'ends)	Contact details
Children's Social Care	Deputy Director - Safeguarding	01865 815122	EDT Senior manager on-call	Via EDT co-ordinator on 0800 833408
Police	<p>CAIU Led Investigation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> MASH supervisor/ TVP DCI or DI for county covering respective office Cowley or Banbury <p>Major Crime led Investigation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SIO or Deputy SIO Head of Major Crime Unit 	101	<p>Accessed via Call Centre:</p> <p>Duty DI or if Major Crime Case: Duty SIO</p>	101
Health	<p>Consultant paediatricians / named doctors for safeguarding at OUH:</p> <p>Janet Craze Julie Johnson (Horton) Maria Finnis / Harjinder Gill</p> <p>Head of Child Safeguarding OUH:</p> <p>Tracy Toohey</p> <p>Oxford Health:</p>	<p>All via JR switchboard 01865 741166</p> <p><u>01865 226890</u> <u>01295 229422</u> <u>01865 231994</u></p> <p>Safeguarding office 01865 223196</p> <p>01865 223220 /07919547524</p>	Same as in-hours	111

	<p>Lisa Lord Jayne Harrison Lucia Bell</p> <p>Service Manager CAMHS Melissa Noton</p> <p>Oxfordshire CCG: Alison Chapman</p>	<p>07900 212470 07795287534 07825681026</p> <p>07717544101</p> <p>01865 336794/ 07775 760798</p>	<p>call centre</p> <p>Office</p>	<p>01865 336800</p>
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