

The Voice of the Child – Approach

This paper provides information relating to the professional guidance for the ways by which local authority Children's Services will record and take account of the voice of children in order to achieve best practice.

The views of children and their families are essential to good practice in social care. The voice of children must be recorded and taken into account no matter of age or ability to communicate. This can be done through direct engagement, observation and through conversation with parents and family members.

Working Together to Safeguard Children (March 2015)

The Working Together to Safeguard Children guidance is the overarching statutory guidance for all relevant professionals so that they can respond to children's needs appropriately. This includes Social Workers, professionals from Health Services, the Police and Education.

Local authorities have responsibility for safeguarding and promoting the welfare of all children and young people in their area. They have a number of statutory functions under the 1989 and 2004 Children Acts. Whilst local authorities play a lead role, safeguarding children and protecting them from harm can be viewed as everyone's responsibility.

The guidance includes a section 'Focusing on the needs and views of the child'. It states that every assessment should be child centred and where any conflict arises between the needs of the child and their parents/carers, any decisions should be made in the child's best interests. Every authority has to give due regard to a child's age and understanding when determining what services to provide.

Children should, wherever possible, be seen alone and children's social care has a duty to ascertain the child's best wishes and feelings regarding the provision of services to be delivered. It is important to observe the resilience of the individual child when planning appropriate services. Every assessment should draw together relevant information gathered from the child and their family; and from professionals including teachers, early years workers, health professionals and the Police.

A high quality assessment is one in which evidence is built and revised upon throughout the process. A Social Worker may arrive at a judgement early in a case but this may need to be revised as a case progresses and where further information comes to light. It is expected as part of the skilled profession that Social Workers will revisit their assumptions in light of new evidence and take necessary action to revise their decisions in the best interests of the individual child.

No system can fully eliminate risk. In order for assessments and decisions to be as robust as possible Social Work Managers should challenge the Social Worker's assumptions as part of this process. This should allow for an informed decision to be taken on the nature of any required action. Critical reflection through supervision should strengthen the analysis in each assessment, with Social Workers, their managers and other professionals always considering the plan from the child's perspective.

Within **one working day** of a referral being received, a local authority Social Worker should make a decision about the type of response that is required and acknowledge receipt to the referrer. The maximum timeframe for the assessment to conclude should be no longer than 45 working days from the point of referral. In some cases the needs of the child will mean that a quick assessment will be required.

For any children in need of immediate protection, action must be taken by the social worker as soon as possible after the referral has been made to the local authority.

Ofsted Framework and Evaluation – Experiences of children who need help and protection

A local authority is likely to be judged as good if:

- Children and young people are listened to, practice is focused on their needs and experiences and influenced by their wishes and feelings or, where they cannot represent their views themselves, those advocated on their behalf. They are consistently seen and seen alone by social workers where statutory guidance requires that this should happen and it is professionally judged to be in the best interests of the child.
- Children, young people and families benefit from stable and meaningful relationships with social workers. They are engaged in all actions and decisions and understand the intentions of the help they receive. Where there are concerns about the safety and protection of children and parents do not engage, there is a full risk assessment and urgent involvement of a senior manager in all decisions about next steps.
- Decision-making is undertaken by suitably qualified and experienced social workers and managers, with decisions, all actions and engagement with the family and other professionals clearly recorded.
- Practice is informed by feedback from children and their families about the effectiveness of the help, care or support they receive from the time it is first needed until it ends.
- Children, young people and families have timely access to, and use the services of, an advocate where appropriate.

Tameside Children's Social Care – Case File Audits

The local approach to case file audits has changed. Past audits have focussed on the last 12 months of the case activity. It is accepted that within the constraints of a time limited audit, the auditor does not have ability to scrutinise the whole child's journey.

As part of the new approach it is important that a meaningful way to monitor a child's journey is created and to assess the impact of the decisions that have been made. The audit also includes a section for the auditor to speak to the child and parents/carers about the views on the service provided. Auditors are asked to sit for an hour with the social worker to look closely at the case file together, which now provides an opportunity for discussion and constructive challenge. The auditor then completes their report and reaches a judgement on the case using Ofsted's classifications of Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement or Inadequate.

The auditor is asked to look at the quality of work undertaken and to put the child at the centre of the audit and to consider 'what is the child's journey?'.

Prior to the audit social workers will be asked to provide the following documents, which will be passed to each individual auditor:

- Initial referral/contact
- Most recent assessment
- Section 47 report or equivalent
- Most recent plan
- Most recent review
- Chronology of significant events