

**Children and Young People's  
Overview and Scrutiny  
Committee**

**9 January 2023**



**Relationship based social  
work practice**

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**Report of John Pearce, Corporate Director of Children and Young  
People's Services**

**Electoral division(s) affected:**

Countywide.

**Purpose**

- 1 The purpose of this report and accompanying presentation is to provide members with an overview of the progress being made within Children's Social Care to embed high quality relationship based social work.

**Executive Summary**

- 2 Durham Children's Social Care and Early Help Services are committed to embedding relationship-based practice across all services, ensuring that the relationship between the child, young person, parent or carer and the practitioners who work with them is central to our practice.
- 3 Since 2018 Signs of Safety has been the practice framework that has been utilised to support high quality relationship-based practice across Early Help, Children's Social Care and the wider safeguarding partnership. Signs of Safety is a practice framework which provides a method and suite of tools to give as much responsibility as possible to families and their network for the safety of their children. It is a strength-based approach, balancing what we are worried about against strengths and safety within a family.
- 4 This report gives a brief overview of the elements of the framework that have been the focus of 2021-22 and provides evidence from collaborative evaluations, case-studies and feedback from parents that working in this way is making a difference to the outcomes for children, young people and their families.
- 5 The Ofsted ILACS inspection carried out in May 2022 is referenced as it validated our internal belief that Signs of Safety was making a

difference to children and families. In summary the inspection found, *“Children in need of help and protection, and children in care, are benefiting from relationship-based practice that focuses on children’s needs. The approach is to work in partnership with families to achieve change that can be maintained over time. This is leading to children and families making sustainable progress.”*

## Recommendation

- 6 Members of Children and Young People’s Overview and Scrutiny Committee are asked to note the content of the report and presentation and comment accordingly.

## Background

- 7 In 2018 across Children’s Social Care and Early help we began to implement Signs of Safety, a practice framework, which provides a method and suite of tools to give as much responsibility as possible to families and their network for the safety of their children. It is a strength-based approach, balancing what we are worried about against strengths and safety within a family.

- 8 As our understanding of the framework has developed we have increased our use of it across teams, services and across partner agencies. Over the last year we have focused on four areas of the framework that have application across teams and services:

**Networks** – Identifying and utilising a family’s naturally connected network is essential in ensuring that families have all the resources they need.

**Mapping** – This is a tool to support strength-based assessment work and provides a framework for asking good curious questions.

**Words and Pictures** – This is a tool that is used to help parents explain their story to their child(ren).

**Questioning approach** – This should underpin all the work that we do and is fundamental to really understanding what life is like for children and young people

- 9 The case examples below demonstrate how a consistent focus on these areas of the practice framework have made a difference to children and young people.

## Training

- 10 We continue to offer a comprehensive training programme with accredited trainers alongside a programme of workshops and bite-sized sessions delivered in-house. The below table shows a summary and numbers of staff who have attended.

Training course	Staff attendance - 2021-22
2 Day Introduction to Signs of Safety	270
5/6 Day Advanced Training	114
Narrated Overview of the Model	188
Bitesize Words and Pictures	40
Bitesize Networks	74
Bitesize Harm Matrix	29
Bitesize What's Working Well	21
Bitesize Analysis (Danger Statements/Safety Goals/Scaling)	41
Returning Children Home to Care of Parents	182
Safety Plans and Planning Workshop	147

## Key developments

- 11 We have consolidated all the work we have done since the beginning of the implementation and published a comprehensive practice guide for practitioners that sets out how we apply the practice framework in Durham.
- 12 We have used the practice framework to drive improvement in the quality of care planning and care plans for children and young people across Children's Social Care. Within Early Help services we have used the framework to develop and re-launch our Early Help Assessment tool.
- 13 We have continued to develop our IT system (Liquidlogic) so that it supports practitioners and managers effectively using the practice framework. Significant development work has been undertaken in relation to the format of Care Plans, the ability to record a Mapping tool to inform assessments, the ability to record the Harm Matrix tool to support risk assessments, the ability to record an Early Help Assessment.

## Partnership

- 14 We have a well-established partnership group that continues to identify areas of the practice framework that can support the work of partner agencies and promote high quality multi-agency working. Over the past year we have developed and launched a new Early Help Assessment and designed a single report format for Child Protection Conferences. The North East Ambulance Service have begun to explore how they can use the framework to support their crews ask more curious questions when attending households and the education team have piloted the use of the framework to identify children who require support when transitioning from primary to secondary school.

## Impact

- 15 We know from our internal and external scrutiny that the implementation of Signs of Safety in Durham is having an impact on children and families.

- 16 Ofsted inspectors are not able to advocate one particular practice framework above another, so will never name Signs of Safety in an inspection report but where they refer to a practice framework in the context of Durham they are referring to Signs of Safety.

- 17 The ILACS inspection published in July 2022 wrote in their overarching summary that, *“Children in need of help and protection, and children in care, are benefiting from relationship-based practice that focuses on children’s needs. The approach is to work in partnership with families to achieve change that can be maintained over time. This is leading to children and families making sustainable progress.”*

- 18 There was a thread throughout the inspection report of Signs of Safety making a real difference:

*“Senior leaders have enabled and facilitated the embedding of the chosen practice model, which is underpinned by **relational practice**. There has been a relentless focus and deliberate drive to working longer and more intensively with families, in order to achieve **real sustainable change**, and to improve children’s circumstances in the longer term, preventing multiple re-referrals back to the service.”*

*“A proactive culture of working in **partnership with families** leads to children and families receiving sensitive and proportionate early help support”*

*“There is effective use of **family network meetings**, which lead to robust and helpful family-led support plans.”*

*“For children on child in need and child protection plans, social workers use **strong relationship-based practice to build trusting and enduring relationships** with children and their families.”*

*“When children can no longer safely remain at home, they are brought into care at the appropriate time. They are well supported by committed social workers who visit children regularly and build **trusting and understanding relationships** with them.”*

*“The experiences of care leavers are improving through **strong relationships** with their young persons advisers (YPAs), who provide valuable emotional and practical help.”*

- 19 Two key measures within Children’s Early Help and Social care continue to evidence that this work is leading to sustainable outcome:
- 20 Durham has exceeded the 2022/2023 target set by DLUHC of 760 families ‘turned around’ with a total of 883 families successfully achieving significant and sustained outcomes as of October 2022.
- 21 We have seen a sustained improvement in our re-referral rate within Children’s Social Care, which has reduced from 28% in 2019/20 to 18% in 2021/22 which is below our comparators. This has reduced further in the year to date to 16%.
- 22 Relationship based practice continues to be the strongest feature in our collaborative evaluation programme and is highlighted in the three quotes below:

*“XX on speaking about her Social Worker described XX as the best Social Worker that she could have had. She saw her through some dark times and offer her support which was a million percent, stating that she could not have done it without her.”*

*“When asked what could have been done differently/better, XX responded by saying 'don't have anything as everything was supportive and helpful'.”*

*“XX has felt that all of the planning has been around her and what she wished for. Workers did not judge but were patient and helped support her when she started to build her relationship with her mother.”*

## **Case studies that evidence impact**

- 23 The case studies below highlight how the key principles and some of the tools within the framework have been skilfully applied by practitioners to make a real difference for children and their families.

### **Key Worker and Family Worker in Seaham One Point Team**

- 24 Words and pictures is a simple creative tool that provides parents with the opportunity to explain to their child(ren), in “words and pictures”, their explanation for an event or series of events. It can have a significant therapeutic impact on the adults completing the exercise and it promotes an honesty with children and young people that has real impact.
- 25 In this example a child’s mother was struggling to manage his behaviour. It was evident that his behaviours were a response to not understanding why his father was not in the family home. There was a history of domestic abuse and his mother told practitioners that she struggled to answer the young person’s questions about why he did not live with her or see his dad so avoided this. This caused conflict between them impacted on their relationship.
- 26 By completing a words and pictures explanation with the child’s mother and sharing it with her son the child no longer felt rejected as he understood his story and now feels he belongs to a family. His mother has said she, *‘feels that she has her little boy back’*. When discussing words and pictures she said it was, *‘something so hard yet this was so simple.’*

### **One Point Family Worker**

- 27 In this example Words and Pictures was used to support a family that was struggling around the suicide of mother’s partner and the children’s father. The children thought he would be returning to the family home after two weeks.
- 28 A words and pictures explanation was completed with the family showing their dad loved them but would not be returning. The children really liked this explanation and shared the words and pictures with people who entered into their life.

### **Fostering Services**

- 29 Words and pictures explanation used with a connected carer to help a child who was struggling, to remind her why she was living with aunty and what was happening with family time.

- 30 The new story helped the child to remember why she was with aunty so the child started to open up to her aunty about her worries. The child understands that she is safe now and what people are doing to make her happy.

### **Children in Care Team**

- 31 This example involves a family of three siblings who had been in foster care for over three years. The social worker skilfully used the mapping tool to set out what the worries were about the children returning home, but as important the existing strengths and safety that would support such a plan. There was a focus throughout this intervention on strengths and what had changed since the children were removed, for mother and the children. The children were kept at the centre of everything and the timeline allowed the care team to work to a specific date to return the children home which helped to build hope for the family. These children returned to their mother's care, which means the children can grow up in their natural family, but continue to have a relationship with their foster carer and other people who are important to them. The feedback from the children's mother is below:

*'My first experience of Children's Social Care wasn't great. I'm not sure if it was fear on my part or not trusting the system, but it felt as though the goal posts were being moved and I didn't have any hope. I couldn't build a relationship where we communicated and this led to me telling lies and not thinking about the part I played in it. Once the kids were removed, I knew I needed to put some trust in services. Charlotte was easy to communicate with. She was responsive. If I needed advice, I could ask her. I trusted her and I could talk to her. Everything I was asked to do, I did. Every time I contacted Charlotte, she would get straight back to me. I suffer from anxiety so this was a massive help. I could be open with Charlotte. With her, everything was dealt with when I asked. Charlotte is very easy to talk to. Now the children are home, every night I feel accomplished. I look back on my day and I reflect on it. Everything feels natural. I know it's not going to be perfect but knowing I can speak to Charlotte when I have any worries is helpful. If she can, she will help me. If I'm struggling, I can tell her. I've waited 4 years to get my children back. I worked so hard to get here. It feels like my life is complete. I feel content and relieved. Everything is how it is meant to be.'*

### **Consett Families First Team**

- 32 This example involves children subject to a child protection plan. The practitioners involved the family and significantly their wider network from the beginning of their work. They used the Mapping tool with family and the network to map what the worries were but also the strengths and existing safety within the network. In doing this they were able to

build a trusting relationship with the family and the children began to open up about what life was like for them. This ensured that the practitioners had an accurate assessment of risk, and could develop a meaningful plan *with* the family and wider network. In turn this gave the practitioners confidence that the children no longer required a child protection plan.

### **Areas for development**

- 33 Through the existing project governance and specific support from our two Signs of Safety Co-ordinators we will continue to work across Early Help, Social Care and the wider Safeguarding Partnership to identify areas where practice can be strengthened and ways in which the practice framework can be aligned to all services.
- 34 There will be a specific focus on supporting staff identifying and describing adult behaviours that are having an impact on children and that need to change to make life safer for children.
- 35 Work will be undertaken to identify how the practice framework can support the Family Centre offer, and it will be integral in the development of the Family Hub model.
- 36 The IT system will continue to be reviewed to ensure that it supports practice developments across the system.
- 37 Throughout this work we will continue to ensure that we are seeking feedback from children, young people and their families so that we know that this way of working with them is making a difference.

### **Conclusion**

- 38 Since 2018 there has been a continued drive to implement Signs of Safety across Early Help and Children's Social Care. Our collaborative evaluations and feedback from children and families is providing increasing evidence that the principles and tools within this framework are effectively supporting practice and making a difference to children and families.
- 39 The Ofsted ILACS inspection in July 2022 provided external validation of the progress being made with reference to relationship-based practice threaded through the inspection report.

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## **Appendix 1: Implications**

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### **Legal Implications**

None

### **Finance**

None

### **Equality and Diversity / Public Sector Equality Duty**

None.

### **Climate Change**

None.

### **Human Rights**

None.

### **Crime and Disorder**

None.

### **Staffing**

None.

### **Accommodation**

None.

### **Risk**

None.

### **Procurement**

None.