Report to Hull Safeguarding Children Board – 19th March 2014.

Evaluation Report - Strengthening Families approach to Child Protection Conferences

1. Brief Background & Introduction

In March 2013, the Board supported the local development and introduction of the 'Strengthening Families' model for Child Protection Conferences (CPC's) on a trial basis. This followed presentations about the model, including the outcomes of evaluations elsewhere. The Board also recognised that the model is wholly consistent with the values and principles of 'systemic practice'. This represented an opportunity for the Board to provide 'systemic leadership' and to model a new way of working with families.

The new model 'went live' in October 2013. A written feedback evaluation process was built in from day one. By the end of November 2013 this had yielded 210 separate pieces of written feedback (166 from professionals and 44 from parents) from 86 CPC's. This initial feedback was presented to HSCB in summary form in January 2014. Board members also had the opportunity to hear directly from conference chairs about their experiences with the new model.

This report reflects the information from the second phase of the Strengthening Families (SF) evaluation which commenced 2nd December 2013 and was completed mid February 2014. For this evaluation a sample of 16 CPC's were identified to be observed (4 Initial and 12 Review CPC's).

This second phase was designed to gain qualitative information about the process of the Strengthening Families Model and its impact, from the perspectives of independent observers and participants (chairs, minute takers, professionals and parents).

2. Evaluation Methodology

    2.1. The Criteria for Observers

16 professionals, known as 'observers', volunteered from across the partnership to be involved in the evaluation, from Health, Police, Education, Children's Social Care, Probation, HSCB, Adult Substance Misuse and Adult Social Care. The criteria for observers were that they:

1. had an understanding of the previous CPC Model and the CPC Strengthening Families Model
2. made a commitment to personally undertake all the tasks involved in the evaluation
3. had no prior knowledge / involvement in the case for the CPC which they were being asked to observe
4. attend a feedback meeting at the end of the evaluation

    2.2. Tasks for observers

Two briefings were held for observers to explain the tasks involved. This included the process for recording feedback and points of contact should they encounter any issues. These contacts were identified as being the Independent Conferencing and Reviewing Officer (ICRO) Manager

for any issues in relation to observing a CPC and the HSCB Professional Practice Officer (PPO) for any issues about the evaluation, tasks and support.

 Each observer made a commitment to undertake the following tasks as part of the evaluation:

- An observation of the process of a SF CPC and feedback to the conference chair
- A conversation with the parents/ carers and with the child/ young person, if appropriate
- A conversation with the child's social worker and two other professionals who attended the CPC (chosen by the observer)
- A conversation with the child's social worker after the first Core Group had been held
- Feedback on the Child Protection Conference Record (this task was not included at the outset and was an additional task given later in the process).

A number of areas were identified for observers to consider in their conversations with parents/carers, children/ young people and professionals with an emphasis on the SF Model and its impact and for the observation of the SF CPC. All recording from Observers was submitted under these headings and all references to the family and professionals anonymised.

The role of the observer in relation to the SF CPC was clearly defined as being observer only.

2.3. Evaluation Process

Two information sheets were produced to explain the purpose and process of the evaluation: one for social workers and one for parents and carers (appendices 1&2)

Conferences were identified and matched with each observer's availability. The Conference Chair was informed of the observation and an e-mail was sent to the Child Care Social Worker (CCSW). This e-mail included both information sheets and a request to the CCSW to discuss the planned observation with the family and to seek their consent to their CPC being observed.

This process worked well. In the majority of cases parents and carers arrived at the CPC fully informed about the SF evaluation and having consented to the observation. On occasions, where this had not been the case, the process was explained on the day and consent was given. Of all of the families approached for consent only one declined.

With the exception of one parent who was unable to attend due to unforeseen circumstances and was happy to consent to the Observer being present at the CPC, parents /carers were in attendance at every conference observed.

Throughout the evaluation there were regular multi-agency Strengthening Families' meetings (6 weekly). This group provided a feedback loop for progress both in respect of the evaluation and any emerging issues.

3. What has been learnt from this evaluation?

This section provides a summary of the observer's feedback from conversations with Parents/ carers, professionals and Independent Conference and Reviewing Officers and feedback from the Child Protection Conference Minute Takers. Feedback has been summarised under headings as identified below.

3.1. Learning Specific to the 'Strengthening Families' Model

- The Layout of the Room

The horseshoe layout of the tables was seen as a significant factor in creating a less formal environment in which both families and professionals felt better able to engage with the SF Model and participate. Comments were made about the importance for parents and carers in being able to choose where they wanted to sit and about the physical layout being more open and allowing the parents to see everyone. Some professionals felt that some
parents / carers might feel intimidated by this arrangement. This concern was not born out in this evaluation.

The layout facilitated the direct engagement of the CPC chair with parents and it was generally reflected that it felt more inclusive and less intimidating than the layout in the previous style of CPC. This new layout was seen as a positive change, conducive to creating an environment in which participants feel they can engage.

Initially all attendees had a name card on arrival which remained on table throughout the CPC. Whilst this was felt to be a valuable part of the process, it was not viable in the long-term. Name cards were becoming increasingly difficult to read after repeated use and couldn't always be seen by everyone present. The current arrangement is for all attendees to wear a sticker with their details (name and organisation) which is given as they sign in.

There were some occasions where parents didn't always have a good view of the whiteboard / flip chart. It is worth noting that consideration needs to be given to advising parents where the best place might be to sit so that they can see the Whiteboard / flip chart paper.
Family's wholeheartedly preferred the layout and, as a mother who had attended CPC's in the previous style commented: *"Before, I was hardly asked anything at all and the way the tables were set up and the new computer screen thing was good".*

- The Use of a Genogram

It was apparent from the feedback that the genogram was used flexibly to meet the needs of individual parents / carers. For example, where one parent hadn't wanted to talk first in the CPC or go through the genogram in detail but did agree to provide an update to reflect current circumstances to the pre- prepared genogram. Sometimes a pre-prepared genogram was used as a reference point when discussing and exploring the family's support network and at other times it was on the wall but not referred to directly.

Particular reference was made to the value of those genograms that were completed at the beginning of the conference, facilitated by the chair, which 'allowed the parent to speak without being pressured '. This was felt to be useful on a number of levels from the professionals' perspective. Having a genogram was felt to be helpful in assisting them in gaining a better understanding of the family's relationships and support networks and 'is a good tool to engage parents / carers in talking about their family and gives a clear signal that professionals understand that they (the parents) are experts in relation to their family'.

One parent reflected that she liked the genogram and talking about her family and that it showed how busy she was and how she needed help. Feedback from a father was that the

genogram was "alright". He had felt sorry for his ex partner when he saw her side as it made him see more of what she "is going through".

There were occasions when a genogram was not undertaken and it was suggested that had a genogram been undertaken it may have assisted professionals in having a better understanding of families' support networks and more insight into their particular circumstances.

It was acknowledged that for most parents/ carers the genogram appeared to be particularly helpful. However, there were others who found it difficult and felt they couldn't contribute further to the genogram.

- <u>The Use of the Whiteboard or Flipchart Paper and Domains</u>

Early on in the trial there were a number of technical difficulties with the use of the whiteboards. These have since been addressed by having some training in their use, provided by East Hull City Learning Centre. On reflection, training for ICRO's and Minute takers in the use of the interactive whiteboard prior to their introduction in SF CPC's, with ongoing timely support, would have been useful.

On occasions, where the computer/ interactive whiteboard were not functioning, flipchart paper was used as an alternative. This ensured that there was a visual representation of information shared within the five domains of the model (danger/risks, complicating factors, safety, strengths and grey areas), and risk and safety statements. This simple visual representation of information is central to the model.

There were some early concerns in the first part of the evaluation that the need for chairs to record on the whiteboard might have a detrimental impact on their continued engagement with conference members. However, it is evident from this evaluation that this has not been the case. It has been suggested that the time when the chair is recording in the domains is useful as it gives members an opportunity to reflect. In addition the visuality also contributes to a sense of openness and transparency, assisting all conference members to remain focused on the issues.

Whilst the impact of the visual representation is seen as useful for everyone attending a CPC it has been identified as being particularly significant for parents /carers, in that it ensures information from them doesn't get lost. Capturing their input in this way has helped parents / carers feel that they have been listened to and understood. This has been attributed to the family's 'strengths' being identified and recorded alongside the other domains.
As one mum said, writing on the whiteboard was helpful as she "got where everything was coming from".

There was an acknowledgement that, whilst seeing things written down in this way could be difficult for some parents / carers, the benefit of the clarity and openness which this brings is of value in assisting parents and carers to understand the issues even when is not what they want to hear.

- <u>Risk and Safety Statements</u>

It is evident that writing on the whiteboard/ flipchart helps to pull everything together when discussing and agreeing the risk and safety statements. Most parents / carers in this sample were actively involved in developing both risk and safety statements.

Families were encouraged and supported by the ICRO's to add their comments to risk statements. There are examples of parents actively considering what the risks were and what impact these might have upon the child. Family feedback was that generally they felt they had had the opportunity to contribute and commented on both the risk and safety statement and felt there was a greater emphasis on family involvement in this model.

However, the involvement of professionals in contributing to risk and safety statements was found to be inconsistent. This resulted in some instances where the Social Worker, Team Manager and family were the only contributors, despite huge efforts on the part of the chairs to encourage the other professionals to participate.

- Time

Since the introduction of the pilot of the SF CP Model there has been an agreement to reduce the number of CPC's undertaken on a daily basis from three to two.

From the start it was acknowledged that the process of this model would probably initially take more time than the previous style conference and that time needed to be allowed to embed the model.

In the first part of this evaluation the impact of the extended time that CPC's take under this model had been identified as potentially having a detrimental impact on professionals' work loads. The fact that CPC's tend to be lasting longer under this model has also been highlighted in this part of the evaluation. However, the consensus view is that it is 'worth it' because of the buy-in from all involved. Significant benefits from this model have been identified, namely that CPC's are more comprehensive and productive and that the additional time is well spent as it is better to carefully reach the right outcome for children and their family.

Some professionals who have had experience of attending more than one SF CPC have commented that , as everyone becomes more familiar with the process, meetings are taking a little less time. These professionals acknowledge that the benefits outweigh this one negative.

One parent commented that they appreciated the time that was taken for the conference and that if there had been less time everything would have been condensed and not as relaxed.

There have been some suggestions that, where conferences are lengthy, breaks are built in. This has been, and will continue to, occur at the Chair's discretion and has been successful in maintaining continued engagement for all parties.

- The Child Protection Conference Record

In order to reflect the SF CPC Model a new format was developed to Record CPC's which replaced the previous CPC Minutes. (Appendix 3). This has been particularly challenging for minute takers as the format of the SF CPC Record is significantly different from the previous way of recording. Initially this led to a backlog in CPC Records being produced which, in part, was directly attributable to adapting to this new way of working.

Feedback from parents/ carers and professionals is that they like the CRC Record format and feel that it accurately reflects the SF conference and is 'easy to read and understand'.

▪ <u>Parent/Carer and Child/Young Person Involvement</u>

In the sample for this trial there were no children / young people in attendance at any of the CPC's.

Evidence from the majority of parents / carers was that they clearly felt more involved in this model. They were able to say what they wanted; felt listened to and felt included all the way through. Comments made by professionals reflected that some parents/carers visibly grew in confidence as the CPC progressed and, even where parents had found it difficult to be in the conference, they had managed to remain involved.

Parents/carers were generally very complementary of the chairs involvement from arrival onwards. Although this is not new to the CPC process and has been established practice for many years, the pre- meeting with the chair was identified as being particularly helpful. This was reflected in the following feedback collected by observers: '*Felt more involved in this one as the chair explained everything*'; and, '*didn't feel picked on like the first conference* '.

Parents/carers reflected that they understood the reason why a CPC was being convened (although they may not agree with it) and liked the fact that more emphasis was placed on identifying and resolving the issues collectively. It was felt this resulted in a better understanding between family and professionals.

It was noted by the observers that there is a gap in provision of an advocacy service to support children / young people and their parents / carers in attending CPC's and representing their views.

Although this evaluation was never about any specific focus on conference chairs it is acknowledged their role is pivotal and it is noteworthy the number of professionals, parents and carers that have reflected their positive regard for the skill and professionalism of the chairs.

▪ <u>The Involvement of Professionals</u>

Professionals reflected that they found the SF CPC Model more of an open forum than the previous model and one in which all professionals are given the opportunity to contribute in a more inclusive way; "*everyone has equal say whereas before you had to sit and wait for your turn to speak. Now you can just add to what's being put on the board at any time.*" The notion of the conversational manner in which it would appear many conferences have evolved under this model was seen as useful in providing the opportunity to be involved in discussions in all areas of the model.

Support for creating an outline plan in the conference was seen as particularly valuable in establishing shared responsibility and understanding amongst professionals and the family.

Some professionals reflected that they were unsure about what was expected of them during the CPC and expressed concern about feeding back and the impact this could have on their relationship with the parents/carers. Although this is probably not learning which is specific to

this model it is important to understand and acknowledge that some professionals require further support. This could in part be met through training but also highlights the need to ensure that professionals contributing to CPC's are supported within their respective agencies.

- <u>What life is like for the child</u>

There is a clear and explicit focus, intrinsic to the model, on building an understanding of what life is currently like for the child and on what needs to change to make the child's life safer. The multi-agency report form (MARF) clearly asks all professionals to comment on 'what life is like for the child', both from the child's perspective and from observation.

In some conferences there was a clear picture of what life was like for the child especially from the CCSW. In others this was less apparent and some professionals felt that those who perhaps knew the children best could have made a more significant contribution. There was also reference to the fact that, whilst in this model there is clearly a focus on engaging the parent/ carer and ensuring they are central to the process, we need to ensure that this is not at the expense of the child being central to the process.

In some reports, and in some conferences, there was a clear sense of what life was like for the child/ young person. However, in some discussions with observers, some professionals were less confident that there had been a clear picture of what life was like for the child.

Some professionals reflected a sense of confusion about what this actually meant and how and by whom this should be conveyed in written form. It was interpreted by some to mean a bespoke piece of work termed as 'wishes and feelings' with a child or young person, rather than a professional view based on their involvement with the child/ young person and his/her family. This is clearly an area that would benefit from some clear direction which needs to be contained within the HSCB Guidelines and Procedures and the SF CPC Training.

3.2. <u>Additional Learning – Non-model specific</u>

- <u>Report submission and sharing</u>

Practice varies in terms of the provision of reports to conference and there continues to be an issue with some agencies/ organisations providing reports on the day of the conference and, in some cases, not at all. In the feedback, in respect of report submission, some professionals reflected that they thought it was "a good idea" that reports are provided by all agencies working with the family. It is clear that this was viewed as a recent expectation (part of the new model) when in fact this has been a requirement for many years and is explicitly evident in the current HSCB Guidelines and procedures.

In order to begin to address this issue, since January 2014, all professionals attending CPC's when signing in are asked to record whether they submitted a report and when. Notices are also being displayed in both conference rooms reminding professionals of their responsibility as out lined in the HSCB Guidelines and Procedures to provide a report 3 working days prior to the CPC.

The quality of reports seen was also variable, ranging from incomplete and with scant information to in-depth with good analysis. Most professionals (other than CSS and police) provided reports on the SF Multi-agency report format (MARF see appendix 4) which was

viewed by professionals as being a good format and fit for purpose; however some reports have been submitted in an alternative format.

Where reports were not submitted using the MARF they were difficult to translate into the format of the conference, especially when there was no one in attendance to speak to them. In contrast, when reports were submitted using the MARF, and where the author or a representative attended, this led to more consistency and more focused input during the CPC.

Some of the issues identified as a being barriers to producing a report for a CPC were:
- not enough time and/ or notice given and
- difficulties accessing the MARF

There has been a system in place since the introduction of the trial of the SF Model to provide professionals with the Multi-agency Report Format. On the whole this has been successful. In addition, the MARF is accessible to download through the HSCB Website on the front page.

There have been some small adjustments made to the detail and format of the MARF which has been undertaken as feedback has been received during the SF trial and it is planned that, subject to the SF model being endorsed by the Board, a link to the MARF will be contained within the revised CPC Guidelines and Procedures.

Other issues that have arisen in the provision and sharing of reports are:
- some professionals not feeling confident to complete the form in its new format
- some agencies / organisations feeling that some areas are not relevant to them
- reports not being shared with families at all
- reports being shared with families just prior to the conference
- no recorded comments from parents/ carers or children / young people

Generally it was felt that the CCSW's reports were helpful, especially in respect of providing information about family history and that they assisted other professionals in understanding the context for respective families. Reports provided by other agencies were equally valued by other CPC members.

Most MARF's contained an overview of the agencies involvement; however the quality of the information within the domains was variable.

- <u>Core Group and Plan</u>

The attendance of professionals at the first core group following the CPC was patchy. There was a good example given of a well-established core group who had developed good working relationships with the family and with each other. In this case, where professionals were unable to attend the core group apologies were given and an update given of their involvement.

Other feedback reflected that few agencies involved with the family attended the core group, even when they had been present at the CPC. On some occasions apologies were given and on others they were not so their non-attendance only became evident to the family and other professionals at the point of the core group meeting.

Attendance by parents and carers at core groups was 100%. Some social workers reported there was no difference in the engagement of parents in the core group following attending a

SF CPC. Conversely others reported that it had changed and that mum had appeared more empowered in the core group meeting. This was felt to be attributable to the principles of openness and transparency established within the CPC which then continued for parents/ carers and professionals within the core group.

In all core groups held the plan formulated at the CPC was used which parents and carers understood and acknowledged even when there were areas which they disagreed with. For example, one carer reflected that she thought there would be some good things come from it, but mainly it was intrusive. It is evident that the plan was used as the agenda for core groups and to structure conversations within those meetings.

It was generally reflected by professionals that '*the groundwork had already been done at the SF CPC and this made the core group run easier* '.

4. Implications For Training

The HSCB Training & Development Sub-Committee has agreed the need to develop an additional bespoke training course on effective child protection planning and decision-making. It was also agreed that this training would need to reflect the learning from the evaluation of the SF model 'trial'.

It is evident from the evaluation that the training should encompass:

- Preparation and planning to attend CPC's including compilation of report, completing domains and analysis.
- How to represent what life is like for the child/young person.
- The importance of engagement with family, gathering their views/comments and sharing reports with parents/carers and young people prior to conference.
- Understanding the purpose and value of genograms.
- HSCB Guidelines and Procedures in relation to SF CPC's are made an integral part of the course content

5. Summary

Overwhelmingly the feedback from this evaluation shows support for full adoption of the SF model for the following reasons:

- This strengths based model is a collaborative approach which engages parents, carers and professionals in the process working on the principles of openness and honesty
- It provides a framework through the domains of, dangers / risks, complicating factors, safety, strengths and grey areas to explore all aspects of a child's life
- Parents / carers have been actively involved in producing risk and safety statements to inform the CP Plan
- CPC Plans are being discussed and agreed jointly with parents / carers and professionals during the CPC with the focus being on working together to achieve better outcomes for children and young people
- CP Plans are being taken forward and used as the focus in Core Group meetings
- Both parents / carers and professionals report improved engagement in CPC's

6. Next Steps

1. Present findings to next HSCB meeting 19th March 2014
2. Formally adopt the CPC Strengthening Families Model
3. Meet with Observers 20th and 27th March to give feedback on the evaluation and take feedback from them on evaluation process (which will go some way to informing no 5)
4. Develop a SF CPC training package initially aimed at those professionals,(supervisors and their managers) within agencies / organisations who are most likely to attend CPC's
5. Continue to evaluate the development and impact of the model through a process similar to that undertaken by observers. This would include an observation of the core group and feedback on Core Group minutes
6. To develop an advocacy service. This continues to be high on the agenda for the HSCB and its partner agencies but has yet to be resolved.
7. Update the HSCB guidelines and procedures to reflect the SF CPC Model
8. Update CPC leaflets

Appendix 1

Strengthening Families Child Protection Conference Model Information for Families

On the 7th October 2013 the way in which we hold Child Protection Conferences in Hull changed. It is important for us to hear what parents, carers, young people and professionals think about the new model. In order to do this we would like to observe a number of Child Protection Conferences. If you are reading this then the conference for your child/ children has been chosen, **with your permission,** to be observed. If you feel that this is something you do not wish to do, that's fine and if you agree to an observer being present in the conference and then change your mind on the day of the conference that's also fine.

What will the observer be doing in the conference?

The observer will be somebody who has no involvement with your family and will be in the conference to see how things are being done and how it helps to involve everybody taking part. He/she may make some notes about this**.** You will be introduced to the observer before the conference. **The observer will just be listening and taking in how things are being done, they will not take part in the conference.**

What will happen after the conference?

The observer will contact you after the conference to arrange a convenient time with you to have a discussion about how you personally found the conference. This will be done by asking a number of questions for example: 'Did you feel able to say the things that you wanted to say?'
The observer may have this discussion by telephone or visit you at home which ever is more convenient for you.

The observer will not be asking you anything about why the conference was held or about the details of your family situation.

What will happen after the discussion with you?
You will receive a written copy of the information from the discussion with the observer and will be asked to sign a consent form to say whether you agree to this being included in a report. Your name will not be included.
All the information that has been given to the observer from you and the professionals involved in the conference will come back to the Hull Safeguarding Board and will be put together in a report. You will receive a copy of the report which will also be on the Hull Safeguarding Children Board website.

Thank you for taking the time to read this.

Appendix 2

Information for Social Workers

Evaluation 2 - Strengthening Families Child Protection Conference Model.

 The Strengthening Families Child Protection Conference Model commenced on the 7th October 2013. As part of the ongoing evaluation, from the 2nd December 2013 onwards, a number of conferences will be identified by Judith Dent to be involved in this part of the evaluation. It is planned that a minimum of fifteen child protection conferences will be observed. This will be a combination of initial and review conferences.

For those conferences identified, the Independent Conferencing and Reviewing Officer will contact the child's Social Worker and request that they speak with the family to seek their agreement for the conference to be observed. Where agreement has been given, an independent observer will be present in the conference whose role will be to observe the process of the new model and not in any way participate in the conference. If the family agree to an observer and change their mind on the day of the conference then the families' wishes will be respected.

Following the conference the observer will be asked to provide written feedback. In addition, the observers will have conversations with three professionals who attended the conference, the chair, parents / carers and young person (if appropriate) to gain their respective views of the process and provide written feedback. The observer will make contact with the child's social worker after the first core group meeting to take feedback about this.

The findings of the evaluation will be collated in report format which will be shared with all those involved before being uploaded onto the HSCB website.