



Cambridgeshire
County Council

Safeguarding and Standards Unit Audit Report

Core Groups

Confidential

This Draft Issued To Finance and Performance Board

Date October 2010
Lead Auditor Ashley Hinson

Status **Final Report**

An Audit of Core Groups

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1.0 Background and Scope

“Core groups are manifestations of inter agency co-ordination, inter-professional communication and significantly, partnership with parents and children. It is imperative that all agencies ensure a total commitment to this part of the child protection process, recognising that the sharing of information, working in partnership with families and multi agency planning is paramount to the effectiveness of protecting children and assessing and providing for their needs.” (Highland Child Protection Committee, 2004)

The Audit of ‘Core Groups’ was undertaken as both part of the 2010/11 Safeguarding and Standards Unit (SASU) Audit Programme, and the LSCB Audit Programme. It was sponsored by Peter Wilson (Head of Safeguarding and Standards)

The role and function of core groups is outlined in sections 5.116 – 5.119 in Working Together [DFES, 2010]. Core group meetings are an essential prerequisite for effective multi agency planning when children are subject to a child protection plan.

Working Together 2010, and Cambridgeshire’s LSCB Procedures provides guidance on:

- Responsibilities
- Membership
- Co-ordination of meetings
- Frequency
- Recording
- Working with parents
- Updating the child protection plan

1.1 Relevance

Nationally, securing the wellbeing of children by protecting them from all forms of harm and ensuring their developmental needs are responded to appropriately are primary aims of Government policy.

Locally, in the recent Future of Social Care Document, Niki Clemo (Service Director: Children's Social Care) stated that the priority for Cambridgeshire's Social Care continues to be in "promoting the health and well being of children and their families by the provision of high quality safeguarding services..."

Core Groups have a critical part to play in the provision of high quality safeguarding services. They are often seen as the engine room for progressing Child Protection Plan and can provide a barometer of multi agency working.

The recent Peter Connelly case has led to a re-evaluation of multi-agency working; quality of child protection plans and core group working. In each of these areas the Joint Area Review of Haringey¹ undertaken by OFSTED; the Healthcare Commission and HMIC found the performance of the local authority and partner agencies 'inadequate' (c.f. sections 7,31, and 32 of report).

Given the requirement for local authorities and partner agencies to re-examine the quality of their safeguarding arrangements for children and families, it is an appropriate time to look into the functions of core groups in Cambridgeshire.

1.2 Limitations of this Audit

This Audit sought evidence through a combination of an analysis of Core Group Meeting Minutes and the undertaking of contextual interviews with key social care staff. Some specific tests involved seeking evidence of other recording – i.e. Supervision Records.

This Audit did not include a detailed review of the Cases within the sample, and therefore should not be seen to provide assurance of the quality and effectiveness of the overall work undertaken in the individual cases.

¹ [http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxcare_providers/la_view/\(leaid\)/309](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/oxcare_providers/la_view/(leaid)/309)

2.0 Audit Opinion and Summary of Issues

Based on the results of this audit, several issues have been found, and it recommended that these issues are considered with a view to identifying necessary actions to improve the quality of service and systems in place.

2.1 Recording

- Core Groups are being both minuted by, and chaired by, the Social Worker
- Core Group Meeting Minutes offer no clear message about the Core Groups views on the progress, or otherwise, of the plan
- Meeting minutes are not clearly linked to the Protection plan
- Agreed Actions are not always clearly identified within the minutes
- Agreed Actions are not always SMART
- Core Group meeting minutes are not available on ICS
- In one instance no record of the Core Group Meeting could be found

2.2 Meetings (attendance and frequency)

- Some agencies (DV, Drug and Alcohol) were not involved in Core Groups when perhaps they should have been
- There was no evidence of those unable to attend Core Groups submitting a report

2.3 Children's and Family Participation

- There was no evidence that children/young people were having the content/detail of Core Group meetings shared with them
- There was limited evidence that the views of young people were being included in Core Group Meetings
- When young people do not attend Core Groups, the reason is not being consistently recorded

2.4 Staff Support

- There is no multi agency training or social care training dealing with Core Groups or in supporting Social Workers to manager complex meetings

- There is no consistent approach to management oversight of the minutes
- There is a lack of guidance available for Social Care staff in relation to Core Groups

3.0 Findings

3.1 Recording

Core Groups are being both minuted by, and chaired by, the Social Worker

Discussions and paperwork analysis indicated that, unless a Team Manager was in attendance, the Social Worker was the chair of the Core Group Meeting.

There was no evidence found within the entire sample that any agency other than Social Care had chaired or minuted a Core Group Meeting.

Chairing Core Groups is a complex and challenging task. It involves managing the feelings of the family and fellow workers. A great deal of anxiety, anger and fear can be present. In order to chair effectively within this environment, it is clear that there should be no significant distractions.

Whilst the LSCB procedures explicitly state that the chair of the meeting should not also be responsible for the taking of the minutes this was stated as happening in all discussions with staff, and appeared to be happening in all but one of the minutes sampled.

In discussions staff spoke of other Core Group members not offering to chair, not offering to take the minutes, and of there being a culture whereby other professionals turned up and looked to the Social Worker to lead. An Area Manager stated that her staff

“feel all core group members look to social care for everything, they are reluctant to agree any actions themselves, and certainly would not dream of chairing the meeting or taking the minutes.”

This attitude is arguably encouraged by the expectation of Working Together 2010 which places far greater expectation on the Key Worker, who of course needs to be a ‘qualified and experienced social worker’, than it does on other Core Group members. Perversely, Social Workers also spoke of a reluctance to relinquish the perceived control of minute taking and chairing to other professionals.

Many researchers have noted the potential overloading of the key worker (Calder and Barratt 1997, Firth 1995 and Summerhill and Frost 1994 cited in Calder 2001) as an issue.

There cannot be an expectation that Social Workers both chair and minute the meetings. Both tasks cannot be done effectively at the same time.

The subsequent findings related to the quality of the minutes need to be seen in this context.

In one of the eighteen cases within the sample no records of Core Group Meetings could be found

In this instance, the finding was drawn to the attention of the service manager concerned.

Core Group Meeting Minutes offer no clear message about the Core Groups views on the progress, or otherwise, of the plan

And

Meeting minutes are not clearly linked to the Protection plan

Certain information needs to be captured clearly within the minutes. This is particularly so in relation to the views of the Core Group regarding the progress of the child protection plan. This was easier to ascertain in the meeting minutes that had used the plan as the focal point of the discussion, and had used headings from the plans in the minutes.

In the majority of minutes, there was little evidence of explicit statements outlining whether individual aspects of the plan were progressing, or whether there was consensus or dispute about any progress or lack thereof. There was little evidence of any summary commentary providing a clear overview of progress in relation to developing the plan.

“A lack of recording, or recording decisions alone, can lead to misunderstandings and breakdown in communication as individuals become dependent on their own recollections for the missing detail. This is likely to be compounded further for families” (Calder 2001)

The lack of clarity suggests there are occasions when no clear message is provided by the Core Group to the family, or indeed the Core Group themselves, about the overall picture.

Agreed Actions are not always clearly identified within the minutes

And

Agreed Actions are not always SMART

Identifying actions within the minutes proved difficult. It was unclear how each Core Group member would be aware of any individual expectation of them from the minutes.

Some minutes included a summary of actions at the end of the document. These rarely met SMART criteria, lacking timescales and measurability.

Core Group meeting minutes are not available on ICS

At present there is no exemplar available to record Core Group Meeting Minutes on ICS. Whilst some staff spoke of occasionally cutting and pasting minutes into a detail record, and there was some evidence that notes had been entered on to ICS to confirm a meeting had taken place, no consistent approach was being followed.

Whilst the pursuit of a perfect template may be fruitless, there exists the potential to create an exemplar that can overcome the recording issues that have been identified in this Audit, can perhaps pre-populate with relevant sections of the Child Protection Plan and can include columns ensuring awareness of the need for actions to be SMART.

3.2 Meetings (Attendance and Frequency)

Some agencies (DV, Drug and Alcohol) were not involved in Core Groups when perhaps they should have been

And

There was no evidence of those unable to attend Core Groups submitting a report

There were occasions when the information available about families and young people within the sample indicated that there should perhaps have been involvement of another professional within the Core Group.

There were also occasions when Core Group members had not attended, and did not appear to have submitted reports or sent a well briefed colleague in their place. The multi agency exchange of information is a critical component of effective core group functioning. In these instances it appears that the Core Group discussions were missing the views of the absent agency/professional.

3.3 Children and Families Participation

“Core Groups can offer either the potential for new possibilities with children and their parent/carers, or another mechanism for reinforcing oppressive forms of social control” (Calder 2001)

There was no evidence that children/young people were having the content/detail of Core Group meetings shared with them

And

There was limited evidence that the views of young people were being included in Core Group Meetings

And

When young people do not attend Core Groups, the reason is not being consistently recorded

These findings reflected the messages from young people who attend the Talk and Change Group. These are young people who are, or have been, subject to a child protection plan, and who by default will have been the subject of core group meetings.

“No, never been invited. I would like to be able to go. I would like to say how I am getting on. I don't know what's going on, I don't get the meeting minutes, they are sent to my mum. I should get a copy sent in the post so I can see what's been said.” (Young person consulted as part of this audit)

“They are always at my school- I don't like this and it should be at another school where nobody knows me. My social worker doesn't even ask me where it should be- she decides! That really annoys me as I am not even involved one bit and it is about me!” (Young person consulted as part of this audit)

“Never been part of it. They twist what you say.” (Young person consulted as part of this audit)

The voice of the child was absent from the majority of Core Group Meeting minutes. There was very little evidence that Children or Young People had been invited to the meetings, nor was the reason for their absence consistently recorded. Only one young person appeared to have an Advocate in attendance.

There was no clear statement within the Core Group Meeting Minutes about who would ensure the child's views were represented, nor how they would be gathered.

Families Participation

Discussions with staff indicated that there was a belief that families were effectively engaged in the Core Group process. The quality of many of the minutes meant that it was difficult to ascertain what involvement the family had had in the meeting, beyond being physically present.

Discussions with Review Managers found that there was uncertainty with regard to whose role it is to prepare families and young people for the Core Group.

Whilst the feedback from families received as part of this Audit was positive, any updated guidance should consider reflecting the issues identified in Calder and Howarth (2000)

3.4 Staff Support

There is no multi agency training or social care training dealing with Core Groups or in supporting Social Workers to manage complex meetings

Evidence from research shows that interagency training is highly effective in helping professionals understand their roles, responsibilities; procedures; assessments and decision making. (<http://www.education.gov.uk/research/programmeofresearch/projectinformation.cfm?projectid=14957&resultspage=1>)

Working Together 2010 makes clear that there is a responsibility on employers (not individual agencies) to ensure their staff are competent and confident in carrying out their safeguarding responsibilities in accordance with Working Together (p114-115). The guidance states that,

“It is the responsibility of employers to recognise that in order for staff to fulfill their duties in line with Working Together, they will have different training needs which are dependent on their degree of contact with children and young people and/or with adults who are parents or carers, their level of responsibility and independence of decision-making”

In discussions staff expressed unease about their preparedness to undertake the role of key worker, or to chair complex case meetings for the first time.

There is little clear local guidance for practitioners working within Social Care on Core Groups

The absence of multi agency training and development opportunities is compounded by a limited amount of guidance available for practitioners. The guidance that was available (<http://camweb2/Document%20Library/CYPS/csoccare/soccare/CIN%20Extra%20document%20Core%20group%20roles.doc>) was not mentioned by practitioners in discussions.

A search of the internet found that many other Local Authorities and LSCBs have far more detailed guidance for practitioners. Examples included guidance on managing the meeting and of occasions when the Core Group should refer back to the Review Manager.

There is no consistent approach to management oversight of the minutes

Managers spoke of often attending the first Core Group meeting and Core Group for children who have been subject to a Child Protection Plan for a long time. Managers said they do not routinely monitor the meeting minutes but will discuss with staff the Core Group meeting within supervisions

4.0 Issues and Actions

This is a list of issues identified within the Audit. There may be other issues highlighted that you wish to respond to.

Please ensure Actions are measurable, include a named person responsible for the action being carried out and contain a timescale.

SASU will seek an update regarding progress on the actions three and nine months after the Audit Report has been submitted. This update will be shared with the SASU Manager, and the Manager of Specialist Services.

ISSUE	ACTION <i>Including Timescales</i>	PERSON RESPONSIBLE
1. Core Groups are being both minuted by, and chaired by, the Social Worker	<p>Guidance and Training will reinforce existing LSCB requirement that the person chairing cannot also take the minutes.</p> <p>When the key-worker is in attendance Children's Social Care will take responsibility for chairing the meeting. There will be an expectation that the minute taker will come from another agency.</p> <p>To be completed by end of January 2011</p>	Ashley Hinson (via small working group of practitioners/managers)
2. Core Group Meeting Minutes offer no clear message about the Core Groups views on the progress, or otherwise, of the plan	<p>Practitioner led creation of exemplar.</p> <p>Exemplar to be created to include question on Core Groups views relating to the progress of each area of the Plan</p> <p>To be completed by end of January 2011</p>	Jenny Mallett Ashley Hinson (via small working group of practitioners/managers)
3. Meeting minutes are not clearly linked to the Protection plan	<p>Practitioner led creation of exemplar.</p> <p>Exemplar to be created to be linked to the plan and pre-populate with relevant detail</p> <p>To be completed by end of January 2011</p>	Jenny Mallett Ashley Hinson (via small working group of practitioners/managers)
4. Agreed Actions are not always clearly identified within the minutes	<p>Practitioner led creation of exemplar.</p> <p>Exemplar to be created that prompts agreed actions to be recorded in a SMART fashion</p>	Jenny Mallett Ashley Hinson (via small working group of practitioners/managers)

	To be completed by end of January 2011	
5. Agreed Actions are not always SMART	Practitioner led creation of exemplar. Exemplar to be created that prompts agreed actions to be recorded in a SMART fashion To be completed by end of January 2011	Jenny Mallett Ashley Hinson (via small working group of practitioners/managers)
6. Core Group meeting minutes are not available on ICS	Practitioner led creation of exemplar. Exemplar to be created To be completed by end of January 2011	Jenny Mallett Ashley Hinson (via small working group of practitioners/managers)
7. Some agencies were not involved in Core Groups when perhaps they should have been	LSCB to consider creating multi agency guidance. Guidance to include information about who should form part of Core Groups To be completed by end of January 2011	Helen Chrystal
8. There was no evidence of those unable to attend Core Groups submitting a report	LSCB to consider creating multi agency guidance. LSCB to endorse Social Care Guidance LSCB to provide multi agency training that covers Core Groups Guidance and Multi Agency training to emphasise the requirement of those unable to attend submitting reports To be completed by end of January 2011	Helen Chrystal Helen Chrystal Sally Giddins Helen Chrystal/Sally Giddins
9. There was no evidence that	Practitioner led creation of exemplar.	Jenny Mallett Ashley Hinson (via small

<p>children/young people were having the content/detail of Core Group meetings shared with them</p>	<p>Exemplar to include reference to how the detail of the Core Group will be shared with the young person (or why they will not if this is not appropriate)</p> <p>To be completed by end of January 2011</p>	<p>working group of practitioners/managers)</p>
<p>10. There was limited evidence that the views of young people were being included in Core Group Meetings</p>	<p>LSCB to consider creating multi agency guidance.</p> <p>LSCB to provide multi agency training that covers Core Groups</p> <p>Guidance and Multi Agency Training will reinforce importance of young person's involvement.</p> <p>Exemplar will capture young persons views, or the reasons why young people have not been involved</p> <p>Actions to be completed by end of January 2011</p>	<p>Helen Chrystal</p> <p>Sally Giddins</p> <p>Helen Chrystal/Sally Giddins</p> <p>Jenny Mallett Ashley Hinson (via small working group of practitioners/managers)</p>
<p>11. When young people do not attend Core Groups, the reason is not being consistently recorded</p>	<p>Practitioner led creation of exemplar.</p> <p>Exemplar will capture young persons views, or the reasons why young people have not been involved</p> <p>To be completed by end of January 2011</p>	<p>Jenny Mallett Ashley Hinson (via small working group of practitioners/managers)</p>
<p>12. There is no multi agency training or social care training dealing with Core Groups, or in supporting Social Workers to manage complex</p>	<p>LSCB to provide multi agency training that covers Core Groups</p> <p>OD and L will be informed of need to develop training on managing complex</p>	<p>Sally Giddins</p> <p>Ashley Hinson to inform OD and L</p>

meetings	meetings To be completed by end of January 2011	
13. There is no consistent approach to management oversight of the minutes	Practitioner led creation of exemplar. Exemplar will require management sign off To be completed by end of January 2011	Jenny Mallett Ashley Hinson (via small working group of practitioners/managers)
14. There is a lack of guidance available for Social Care staff in relation to Core Groups	LSCB to consider creating multi agency guidance. Social Care to create Social Care guidance – this will be practitioner led To be completed by end of January 2011	Helen Chrystal Jenny Mallett Ashley Hinson (via small working group of practitioners/managers)

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Appendix 1

Evidence Base, Data Collection, Sample and Process

Evidence base

The criteria for this Audit have been drawn from local and national guidance.

- Working Together 2010
- The Cambridgeshire Local Safeguarding Children's Board Procedures
- The Cambridgeshire Local Safeguarding Children's Board Core Group Leaflet
- Cambridgeshire County Council Child in Need Procedure
- Cambridgeshire County Council Core Group Guidance

Relevant research and journal articles were also sourced (see Bibliography).

Data collection

A sample of the 3 area teams were visited as part of the review. The visit consisted of a brief review of the systems, and discussions with staff.

Following on from these discussions, compliance testing was undertaken on a sample of case files to confirm that systems are followed in practice.

A Children's Participation Worker was commissioned to seek the views of young people who have experienced Core Groups with a view to informing this audit, and wider practice.

Review Managers sought the views of family carers via a brief questionnaire used at Child Protection Review Meetings. Families were also asked if they were happy to be contacted to provide further detail.

The sample

The sample was a random selection of 18 young people, subject to a Child Protection Plan, taken equally from across each of the three areas. 2 of the sample did not appear to have any Core Group Meeting minutes. This was drawn to the attention of the respective Service Managers. I was informed on Sept 10th that one of the cases did have Core Group Meeting minutes. Unfortunately this was too late to subject the discovered minutes to scrutiny as part of this Audit.

Process

After each discussion with stakeholders, a written summary of the conversations was sent to the person/people who had been interviewed. This was the first stage in the process of checking factual accuracy.

Draft Initial Summaries of Findings were issued to those whose work had been audited. These summaries took the form of a general summary of issues identified and a area specific summary relating to the cases sampled.

Whilst this enabled a further stage of factual accuracy checking, it did not allow a veto of issues identified that were uncomfortable for the organisation. It provided the opportunity for challenges to be made to the findings and misinterpretations to be clarified. One area team replied, offering views on the general and individual findings. One Area Manager responded confirming that the findings reflected their own analysis of meeting minutes within their area.

This report was sent in Draft format to Area and Service Managers, and the Head of Safeguarding and Standards to provide further opportunity for correction, clarification or challenge.

The Report, in Draft format, was then presented to the LSCB Quality and Effectiveness Group on September 17th.

Following the presentation a Draft Action Plan was compiled and circulated to those who had been involved in the audit.

The Final Draft of the Report, with Draft Action Plan, was then presented to the Finance and Performance Board on October 11th 2010.

The report will then be presented to the LSCB Business Group.

A summary, including Action Plan, will be available on the intranet at http://camweb.ccc.cambridgeshire.gov.uk/cyps/csoccare/safeandstand/social_care_audits.htm