

# Signs of Safety Briefing Paper – January 2015

## Exciting Innovations in the Way we Work with Families

In Autumn 2014, Norfolk County Council successfully bid to become one of ten UK authorities to be part of the national Signs of Safety programme. This programme picks up the 2011 Munro Report recommendations to encourage much more direct work with families and is important, exciting and relevant to Norfolk and to Norfolk children and families as part of our ongoing improvement journey. This will enable us to move towards a strength based, solution focused model that empowers families and enables them to make the changes that they need to make to safeguard their children and support them to achieve their full potential.

## What is the Signs of Safety approach?

The development of Signs of Safety began in the 1990's drawing on solution focused therapy and the direct experience of effective practice by child protection workers and the experiences of families. It is now a comprehensive and mature approach being implemented in over 100 jurisdictions in 12 countries around the world. At the heart of this approach is working with families in an honest, straightforward and respectful way.

The approach has three important objectives;

- (i) practitioners to engage with families so that the family understands why social workers are there and what they are worried about;
- (ii) family strengths and protective factors are included in the risk analysis and;
- (iii) children are safer, with professionals and family members being clear about:
  - what worries them;
  - what needs to be done and;
  - who will be involved with everyday safety of the child, guiding what happens next.

The safety needs of the child are kept to the fore, clearly described and a robust safety plan is built that is clear on what needs to happen, who will do what, and what will need to be seen to show the child is becoming safer. Conversely, it can equally show that the situation is not getting safer.

Signs of Safety builds relationships with families and also between professionals. The emphasis of the assessment is on collecting evidence about the potential for change, while working to strengthen families and their communities by bringing people from the family's network into any plans developed.

In summary the signs of safety approach offers a robust and rigorous framework that analyses risk and takes into account family strengths and resources. The clarity of purpose alongside an open and balanced approach enables us to engage with families and work with uncertainty and different perceptions in a more constructive way.

For further information please see <http://www.signsofsafety.net/>

## What does Signs of Safety mean for partner agencies?

The bottom line: Signs of Safety will be the approach used by social care staff to assess and plan in Child Protection cases as well as Child in Need and Family Support Plans. This gives us the opportunity of developing a single consistent method and "vocabulary" by which to discuss our work with children and their families across Norfolk.

Signs of Safety works best as a joint approach with partner agencies and the family. At a minimum partner agency staff who attend these meetings should understand and adopt the Signs of Safety approach to enable them to take part in meetings effectively and to enable all involved to reach agreement about what needs to be done.

### **How will the Signs of Safety approach help us as partner agencies?**

Partner agencies may find that the Signs of Safety approach has application in their agency /area of work and that the clear but simple principles can also be used in their assessments/planning/casework.

When applied successfully Signs of Safety helps to avoid woolly thinking in assessments, plans driven by unspoken/unidentified worker anxieties and gives clarity to families and agencies about expectations - they know where the goalposts are!.

### **How might the Signs of Safety approach help the families that we work with?**

Signs of Safety simplifies the language we use in our work with families and avoids the professional jargon that families often don't understand and perhaps unsurprisingly fail to meet agency expectations - moving goalposts.

### **What will be the impact of the Signs of Safety approach for my agency?**

The critical point is that understanding Signs of Safety will be essential to working jointly with social care staff as in 1 above. Other things to consider could be how it might lead partner agencies to consider adopting the Signs of Safety approach in their work practices which could lead to changes in their own internal policies and procedures.

The Signs of Safety approach is a good supervision tool that supports front line managers and practitioners to understand and manage the risks/dangers in their worker's cases.

### **Who should we send on the Signs of Safety training?**

There are currently some places on the two day SoS course available for non-Children's Services agencies although these are limited. In the first instance please send managers who need to understand and consider the implications of SoS for their organisation and or those who will have a high level of involvement in child in Need or Protection cases. If you have someone who fits the bill want to book a place please contact [hrlid@norfolk.gov.uk](mailto:hrlid@norfolk.gov.uk) for further details.

We are currently evaluating the level of training needed for different professions and will send a clearer specification out via NSCB once we have evaluated the different levels of training needed.

### **How can we access the Signs of Safety training?**

The current phase of training will run up to April 2015 and we further plan to develop a sustainable training programme offering a wide spectrum training opportunities into the future. We will update partners with further details about training opportunities via the NSCB.

### **When will we start to use Signs of Safety?**

As people are trained you will begin to see more and more frequent use of SoS principles and tools. Child Protection conferences will begin to change from June 2015 although further briefings will be put in place to prepare future attendees for this.

### **How will we know we are getting it right?**

The implementation is part of a National project that is being researched by Professor Eileen Munro who will be looking at the impact on social workers, children and their families, and the project as a whole is being independently evaluated by Kings College London.

Locally we will know we are ultimately getting it right when we are effectively protecting children and have achieved a change of culture showing the voice of the child being clearly reflected in planning as well as much more effective partnerships with families. The main tool for establishing this will be audit and feedback from service users.

### **How will we know what is happening in the Signs of Safety project?**

We have a Partnership Steering group who will help ensure we maintain effective communications with partners. We will also develop a Sign of Safety page for County Council website.

## **Signs of Safety Implementation Frequency Asked Questions – February 2015**

### **Lots of People have been trained, when will the implementation of Signs of Safety start?**

By the end of March 2015 expect to have taken over 600 practitioners through the two day Signs of Safety foundation training and we expect to train 1400 people in all during 2015. We are also developing shorter briefings for those who do not need to take the lead but want to understand the ethos and working methods behind Signs of Safety. Once they have done the training Practitioners are encouraged to begin working within the ethos of Signs of Safety as well as using the working tools. The implementation will therefore be gradual and the depth of practice will increase as workers gain in experience and confidence.

### **When will Child Protection Conferences change?**

We plan to pilot a number of Child Protection Conferences using Signs of Safety during March/April this year, but only in a limited number of cases. We will do this carefully and professionals involved in the cases will be well briefed. It is essential that we learn from the pilot and implement changes to conferencing safely, we will therefore introduce the changes to Child Protection Conferencing gradually across the County. A similar process will be put in place later in the year with regards to Looked After Children's Reviews.

### **How will I be able to know what is happening and contribute if I haven't done the training?**

Signs of Safety offers a working ethos of engagement and partnership with families and those helping them. It encourages the use of plain and clear language. Training will enable professionals to take a lead but without training professionals and families will be more than able to contribute to assessments and plans.

We will be delivering 2 day training throughout 2015 and also developing three hour briefings for those who want to be able to contribute to case discussions and plans but do not need such an in depth understanding of Signs of Safety.

You do not need to worry if you haven't yet done the training, you will already have the skills you need to understand and contribute. Work will be structured differently but this will be no obstacle to either the professionals or families contributing, in fact this should be improved.

### **So what difference will I notice?**

We hope you will notice a different style of work with better partnerships and improved relationships with children and their families. Plans will be developed jointly with families and in written in plain language. In order to get a more rounded understanding of a child's circumstances you are likely to be asked different kinds of questions such as:

- What do you like about the child?
- What was it like before the problem happened?
- What would the children say they like about their parents?
- Who are the people who are most helpful to the children?

You will also increasingly hear the language of Signs of Safety with caseworkers recording or "mapping" on sheets of paper, what people are worried about, what is working well and what needs to happen next. During discussions you may well be asked to rate your concerns or confidence in change on a scale of 0 – 10 and what needs to happen to improve your confidence.

If you have any questions about Signs of Safety please contact Phil Holmes on [phil.holmes@norfolk.gov.uk](mailto:phil.holmes@norfolk.gov.uk)