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Child protection conference practice during COVID-19

Reflections and experiences (rapid consultation September–October 2020)

Executive summary

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Full report, Welsh translation, and list of survey questions available from:

www.nuffieldfjo.org.uk/resource/child-protection-conference-practice-covid-19

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Child protection conferences are a key stage of the child protection system in England and Wales, where professionals come together to identify and address serious concerns about child abuse and neglect that have led them to believe a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm. All parents and persons with parental responsibility as well as family members involved with the child must be invited to conferences unless there is a good reason to exclude. Although unusual the child may be invited to attend, depending on their level of understanding.

Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown measures, professionals and families have had to rapidly adapt to remote or socially-distanced conferences. This research, which comprised an online survey and series of telephone interviews with family members and professionals between September and October 2020, investigates what these changes have meant in practice and offers points for reflection.

Key findings

Child protection conferences (CPCs) are a key stage of the child protection system. This rapid consultation, conducted between September and October 2020, aims to explore how practice has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact this has had on the children, families, and professionals involved. The consultation included an online survey and a series of interviews.

492 professionals responded to the survey and there were respondents from 108 of 151 local authorities in England and 16 of 22 in Wales. 52 of the professionals were also interviewed. 24 parents responded to the survey and 14 of them were interviewed.

How have child protection conferences been affected by COVID-19?

Survey responses suggested that CPCs were mainly being conducted over video or by phone, while a substantial minority of professionals had attended at least one 'hybrid' conference, where some people attended in person, and others joined by phone or video.

Some examples were given of conferences being replaced with a series of bilateral telephone conversations without the opportunity for families and professionals to discuss concerns together.

What are the advantages and disadvantages from professionals' perspectives?

Overall, according to professionals, the positives and negatives associated with remote CPCs are fairly evenly balanced. Nearly half of professionals thought they were better, 35% thought they were worse, and 17% thought they were the same or that the pros and cons balanced each other out.

What is a child protection conference?

CPCs are a key stage of the child protection system in England and Wales. These meetings are attended by professionals, the parents of a child, and sometimes other family members and/or the child themselves.

A local authority will call an initial child protection conference (ICPC) when it has investigated concerns about child abuse and neglect that have led them to believe a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm. The conference is chaired by an independent chair—someone who works for the local authority but is not involved in the case in question. The conference brings together staff from different agencies to consider the information that has been obtained and the assessment that has been conducted.

If it is decided that a child is suffering or is likely to suffer significant harm, those attending the conference develop a plan that is aimed at reducing the level of risk to the child. In Wales, they also decide whether the child's name should be placed on the child protection register. In England, child protection registers ceased to exist in 2008 but local authorities maintain a list of all children living in their areas who are at continuing risk of significant harm and for whom there is a child protection plan.

A review child protection conference (RCPC) assesses whether a child is continuing to suffer, or is likely to continue to suffer significant harm, and the progress made against the child protection plan. The first review conference is held three months after the ICPC. A core group is also established, which comprises the key professionals involved with the child and family; this group must hold its first meeting within 10 working days of the ICPC.

The main advantages identified were:

- better attendance by, and improved engagement of, a wider range of professionals, as well as convenience in terms of time saved
- some felt that CPCs were less intimidating for parents.

The main disadvantages as far as professionals were concerned were:

- limitations in terms of the restricted opportunities for discussion and reflection
- problems with technology
- loss of a sense of seriousness
- issues around parental engagement—this includes parents not always being able to understand what was happening and not being prepared or supported to

engage fully—particular issues were identified for parents with learning difficulties and language or communication needs

- overarching concerns around confidentiality and safety.

Although there were examples of how some practitioners had worked hard to maximise participation, there was also evidence that the desire to keep the system ‘on the rails’ may have jeopardised fairness and respect.

What are the experiences of parents and families?

The small sample of parents who responded to the survey or were interviewed were much less positive than professionals. Half said they had not had the opportunity to speak to anyone prior to the conference, two thirds had not received professional reports before the conference, and only a fifth said the views of children had been written down and shared with those attending the conference. Most parents joined by phone even when professionals joined by video. All parents interviewed said they would have preferred a face-to-face conference.

Concerns were also raised about the impact that challenges within the wider child protection system might be having on CPCs. These include challenges around assessments completed with very limited information, and the formulation of child protection plans in circumstances where support services were often not operating.

Reflections

There was a strong sense from professionals interviewed that CPCs were unlikely to ever return to the ‘normal’ face-to-face model where all professionals would be in the same room.

Many professionals felt hybrid conferences were potentially the best way to keep some of the advantages of ‘remote’ conferences while tackling the disadvantages, especially around ensuring meaningful participation by family members. They did however note

that this may require investment in appropriate technology.

Other steps that could increase the success of conferences included identifying the needs of family members ahead of time, especially in relation to technology and childcare, as well as any communication difficulties. Ensuring that parents were able to speak to social workers and chairs prior to the conference was also deemed important.

Responses suggested that elements of the new ways of working are here to stay. Given the concerns raised in this report, there is a need for further research and for local areas to be reviewing their practice, with a particular focus on the experiences of family members and children.

About Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (Nuffield FJO) aims to support the best possible decisions for children by improving the use of data and research evidence in the family justice system in England and Wales. Covering both public and private law, Nuffield FJO provides accessible analysis and research for professionals working in the family courts.

Nuffield FJO was established by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. The Foundation funds research that informs social policy, primarily in education, welfare, and justice. It also funds student programmes for young people to develop skills and confidence in quantitative and scientific methods. The Nuffield Foundation is the founder and co-funder of the Ada Lovelace Institute and the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

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About the authors

Dr Mary Baginsky is Senior Research Fellow at the NIHR Health & Social Care Workforce Research Unit at King's College London.

Jude Eyre is Associate Director of Strategy and Delivery at Nuffield FJO.

Alice Roe is a researcher at Nuffield FJO.

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Nuffield Family Justice Observatory
28 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3JS
T: 020 7631 0566
Registered charity 206601
nuffieldfjo.org.uk | @NuffieldFJO
nuffieldfoundation.org | @NuffieldFound