

## Signs of Safety across children and young people services

Cumbria County Council is a Signs of Safety Local Authority.

In Cumbria we have adopted the Signs of Safety practice model across our services and partner agencies, to help us in our work with children and families. Working in partnership with children, families and their network is central to our work, we prioritise building positive relationships, as we recognise the importance of this in achieving positive change for children and young people. We take a strengths-based, solution focused approach to our work, and support the family and network to come up with solutions to their difficulties.

The methodology supports our vision that the best place for children and young people to grow up is within their families and networks where they have the potential to care for them safely, and when this is not possible, to provide a secure and stable home and help them achieve their full potential.

### The Signs of Safety principles:

1. Respect everyone as individuals worth working with.
2. Engage the person and don't get lost in the problem.
3. Recognise that collaboration is possible even when differences exist.
4. Recognise that all people have capacities and strengths
5. Maintain a focus on competency and cast a vision for excellence
6. Learn what the other person needs and strives for
7. Always humbly engage others
8. Focus on creating small changes
9. Don't interpret actions ask questions
10. Offer choices
11. Treat every engagement as an opportunity for growth
12. Treat the practice principles as aspirations, not assumptions.

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### The Signs of Safety pillars:

1. Seek to understand positions.
2. Finding exceptions to problems.
3. Discover past successes and existing competencies.
4. Focus on goals.
5. Scale progress.
6. Assess readiness, confidence, and skilfulness.

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## Signs of Safety Methodology

Signs of Safety is a strengths-based practice methodology that aims to work with families and networks by building meaningful safety for vulnerable children. It is how we work with children and families in a meaningful way, through empowering families to develop their own plans. We then test out these plans by reviewing what safety they provide with the children, family, and network. By completing focused direct work with the child or young person we can assess whether their lived experiences are improving and if the plan created by the family and network is working.

It is essential we are communicating in a clear and transparent way, free from professional jargon and abbreviations that children and families can understand. Signs of Safety practice considers; what strengths and safety are in place for a child (what is working well?), as well as identifying the past harm, future danger, and complicating factors (what we are worried about?). Then, when we consider 'what needs to happen next'.

Signs of Safety provides a solution focused practice approach, helping families and networks work towards the future that they want. Families and networks learn what they can do differently, building on their existing skills, strategies, and ideas, instead of focusing on the problem. We therefore work towards a desired future and have goals to outline what this looks like, rather than a continuous focus on the worrying behaviours.

Relationship based practice is an integral part of Signs of Safety. Creating a Genogram and having discussions with the family about who is in their support network is one of the first conversations we should be having with families. The network is key in achieving safety for the children and young people in the short term, but also in the long term, given the network will remain involved when professionals are no longer around.

### Across the service

There is a pre-conception that Signs of Safety is a child protection model, however the practice model is an approach to Social Work practice which can be implemented across children and family social care.

There is no magic meeting or model, there is only us. The question I ask is not how do I do the work, but who will I be in my work.

Kevin Campbell

### Genograms/Networks

Conversations with children and families about who they have in their support network should be taking place at any level of intervention. Identifying who is in the support network is one of the first conversations to be had with a family. These conversations will continue throughout the piece of work, as we know relationships can change over time.

Creating the Genogram is one of the first pieces of work which we start when working with families, not all parents/carers will be forthcoming in sharing information on their family members. Therefore, we will need to ensure that we continue to revisit this, building a professional relationship with the family can help form trust which will encourage the family to be more open. The Genogram is a working document which needs to be regularly reviewed to reflect the current relationships for the family. It is important that we don't just ask who is in the family as we want to know about the quality of those relationships and how

they can support the family, as Maternal Grandma may be on the Genogram but may be estranged to the family and not involved in their life.

It is important that we seek the views of everyone in the household and family for the Genogram, as there may be different perspectives, and this can inform conversations about who is important to them. For instance, a child may talk about their Auntie who the mother hasn't mentioned as they have a strained relationship.

The network is also key for children in care as it can stimulate conversations around who is there to support them when the corporate parent is no longer around. The network can also be beneficial for supervising family time with their birth family, this can help to create a more natural family time away from the children centre, if this is safe to do so. Practitioners have found using the Genogram as a visual tool has helped individuals to recognise, they have a support network when they feel they have no one around them.

An IRO for foster carers shared how beneficial Genograms are for foster carers in supporting the child's identity. It gives them the information and tools to create conversations with the child or young person about their birth family network.

Reviewing the network with Foster Carers/ Adopters and SGO's is vital in terms of ensuring they continue to have adequate level of support around them, and they know who to approach should they need respite.

It is important that professionals consider the impact of the child/young person's disability upon the wider network. Having conversations with parents and carers about their network can help to highlight what support they have in place during times of challenge and what additional respite they may need.

Practitioners have shared they were unclear where to record network details and were conscious of data protection, all queries are answered within the following document: [Data Protection in children and young people services](#)

### Statements and Goals

Depending upon the framework that you are working within will depend whether you have a Danger Statement and Safety Goal, or a Worry Statement and Wellbeing or Success Goal.

The child or young person should be able to understand the statements and goals, as these are the starting point of direct work. The statements and goals are our bookends to our casework, they should reflect the key critical issues of the case, and should be linked. The statement is our assessed need (why we are involved) and the goal is our desired outcome (where we need to get to or what we need to see to end our involvement).

Some practitioners ask what to do when there is no identified risk, for example when working with CLA and SEND, there may not be a danger or worry however there will always be an assessed need and purpose for our intervention which would form the statement. This helps to create focus to the critical issues of the case, and the goal is what we are working towards.

Once we are confident the goal has been achieved, after scaling consistently high, the statement is no longer relevant, and the trio should be removed from the case. There also may be new emerging worries or dangers which mean a new statement, goal and scaling need to be created. It is important to not be changing the statements frequently as this can be seen as the goal posts moving.

## Scaling

A scaling question should be created for each statement and goal, they form a trio. The scaling question should clearly describe the behaviour at 0 and what we would need to see at 10, these should be realistic and specific to the case.

The 0-10 scaling questions are used to gauge the views of everyone involved, it is their interpretation of the information they have listened to. There is no right or wrong number, the number isn't significant it is the conversation around the rationale for the number which is important.

The scaling question should be the focus of reviews as it helps us to evidence progress towards the goal. By asking individuals why they chose the number; what needs to happen to move one number higher, what 10 looks like or what is preventing them achieving 10 and so on stimulates discussion to help direct the next steps.

Some scores may stay the same over time, and this is when we need to consider whether the plan is working and what needs to be done differently. On the other hand, if we are scoring highly over a period of time, we need to consider if the intervention is still required.

Generic scaling questions can be asked during visits or pieces of work, to help the individual gauge where they are sitting currently on a scale of 0-10.

## Direct work

The voice of the child is a fundamental part of practice with children and families, direct work allows us to gain a picture of the lived experiences of the child/young person through their eyes, which forms part of our assessment.

The danger/worry statements are a starting point for direct work, so the child/young person is aware of why we are worried or involved. The questions we ask following this are tailored to the specific worries.

Some children have had Social Workers at various stages of their life so can be familiar with the direct work tools, however they may see the same tools but the questions they are asked will be different. This is because our questions should be focused to the key critical issues of the case. The important aspect of direct work is the questions we ask, planning the right questions can support us in getting accurate information and a true understanding of the impact upon the child, which will then contribute to future planning.

The tools are a guide and can be adapted depending upon the individuals interests and hobbies, using crafts; games, emotion cards, stickers and Lego are just some resources which can be beneficial in engaging children in direct work. Direct work needs to be attuned to the age and understanding of the child.

## Timelines

Previously trajectory, timelines are the plan which details what everyone involved needs to do in order to work towards the end goal, whether that is to close the case or the end of a piece of work.

In relation to long term work in SEND and CLA creating a timeline up until the case closes may be overwhelming, as children can remain open for a significant period of time. It would be challenging to create a timeline for potentially several years, as it cannot be envisaged what tasks may need to be completed in the future. Therefore, we recommended for longer

term involvement creating a 6monthly timeline, as this will often be the period between reviews.

The timeline can be detailed in weeks or months depending upon what works best for the individual case. The timeline is broken down into stages firstly the initial preparation work then safety/care planning and lastly pressure testing/monitoring until case closure/end of a piece of work.

It is important that the timeline details the purpose of visits and meetings, each interaction with a family should have purpose. Rather than just detailing the services a family should attend or a piece of work they would benefit from, provide detail about what we hope they will achieve by doing this, which will lead onto conversations around behavioural change as a result of the work they have completed. The tasks and roles of partner agencies also needs to be detailed within the timeline. The timeframe of when each task will be completed is vital as this prevents drift and delay and places responsibility on individuals. This helps the family to understand what is happening and when.

If a colleague was to be dealing with your case, they should be able to look at the timeline and know exactly what needs to happen. Signs of Safety practice is about having explicit detail that leaves no room for interpretation.

### [Safety/Wellbeing/Success Journal](#)

Dependent upon the threshold or the critical issues of the case, will depend upon the Signs of Safety framework you work under, this will determine whether you have a safety/wellbeing or success journal.

It is critical that the parents and network are given the opportunity to show that their plan rules will work to keep the children safe and well once the professionals are no longer involved. The journal is the way in which we can measure how the rules are working and adapt these if needed.

The journal is used to monitor and review the success of the plan, the entries in the journal should consider when plans have worked and not worked, including changes in behaviour which leads to more safety or wellbeing for the child/ren.

In family time, family workers can document what parents and carers have managed well, this can evidence the progress they have made and how they are implementing any learning. For example, if the parents are putting boundaries in place consistently which they have struggled with previously or have managed a stressful situation without resorting to their previous coping strategies.

Foster carers and Residential homes can use safety journals as a powerful tool with children and young people to help boost their self-esteem and confidence. Safety journals have a specific focus on the plan rules, for instance a young person may struggle with their emotions and have a plan in place to manage their anger. The safety journal can document how they have positively dealt with challenging days. There are always positives to be seen and it is important to highlight these, so the strengths could be built upon. Safety journals are a good way of evidencing when a safety plan is working.

Safety Journals can also be beneficial when working with families who struggle with mental health difficulties; have low self-esteem or are feeling overwhelmed and find it challenging to identify what they are doing well. The safety journal can be used to document how they have used their coping strategies or accomplished something which they have previously found challenging.

The safety journal can also be used as a reflective tool with children and families, they can go back through the journal which highlights their strengths and reflect upon what has worked well during difficult days. This can inform future planning and support them in building their confidence. Some families struggle to identify the positives particularly if they are feeling overwhelmed, therefore practitioners can support them in using the safety journal to draw on their strengths.

### Safety/Wellbeing/Success plan

Any professional who works with children and families are responsible for assessing risk and safety planning. It is essential that everyone involved is aware of the worries to ensure that safety/wellbeing or success can be achieved. Signs of Safety practice focuses on the family and their network creating their own solutions to their difficulties, we know this is more effective than professional led plans.

As professionals we ask the family the right questions to help them come up with their plan, the rules the family and the network come up with are endorsed by the Social Worker to ensure that the plan rules are going to provide Safety/Wellbeing or Success.

The bottom lines are a set of professionally imposed minimum conditions that are put in place to provide immediate safety for a child or young person. The bottom lines are what professionals will not 'budge' on, if these are broken there will be a consequence.

The scaling question can be a beneficial topic of discussion in safety/wellbeing/success planning, the child or young person can be asked what needs to happen in order for them to get to or stay at a 10, this will then be incorporated into their plan.

It is important children are also aware and included in their planning, as through direct work we will know whether the plan is working. Practitioners can be creative with their safety/wellbeing/success plans and tailor these to the child's interest, for example using their favourite colour and getting them to decorate it. Young people may want to do their plan on their phone. There is no right or wrong format, it is what works best for the individual.

### Harm and Safety matrix

The harm and safety matrix helps strengthen our analysis, it can be used in any assessment across services for children and families. The harm matrix focuses on the behaviour, severity, and the impact over a timespan (first incident, worst incident and last incident). Whereas the safety matrix focuses on the behaviour which is providing safety; effectiveness and impact of this on providing safety, and the timespan (first time, most challenging and last time).

The tool supports practitioners in gaining detailed information about the harmful behaviour and the impact of this behaviour upon the child, it helps to focus our thinking on the chronicity of the harm that has occurred.

The harm and safety matrix could also be used in the context of a young person causing harm to themselves, for example if they were struggling with their mental health. Practitioners across early help, SEND, CLA, and other frontline services will work with young people who this applies to. The matrix can help identify their harmful behaviour and the impact upon themselves but also what safety is in place and the effectiveness of this, this can form part of a risk assessment.

If there is more than one worrying/harmful behaviour you can document this on the same harm matrix or have a matrix for each behaviour. The harm matrix should focus on the

current worrying/harmful behaviour, for example in children looked after there wouldn't necessarily be a need to detail the behaviour the child experienced in the care of their parents unless this was linked to the current harm. Whereas in the safeguarding hub, it would be more relevant to cover the longer term or historic behaviour, to contribute to the holistic assessment of whether the case meets the criteria to be transferred for a child and family assessment.

The safety matrix focuses us specifically on the impact of what the adults have done to support the child to stay safe in face of the harmful behaviours. It is important to clearly articulate what the safe behaviour is, how often it happens, its effectiveness and the impact on the child.

The harm and safety matrix helps to provide evidence of the impact of the behaviour on a child and the effectiveness of the safety/wellbeing/success plan.

### Mapping

Mapping is a tool to help strengthen our analysis, the mapping tool can be used in any assessment across services for children and families. The tool focuses everyone's thinking and compartmentalises the information into the headings:

- What's working well (existing strengths and safety/wellbeing or success)
- What we are worried about (past harm or wellbeing/success worries and future danger, wellbeing/success worries)
- Complicating factors (what is making it challenging to reach the goal, but doesn't fall into what we are worried about section)
- What needs to happen next?

Examples of when a mapping tool can also be beneficial is with 'stuck cases' or if parents/carers are struggling with a child's behaviour. Slowing down our thinking and ensuring that all the information is recorded in explicit detail, allows us the opportunity to refocus.

Each statement recorded within the mapping tool should be meaningful and detail the specific behaviour and what the impact of this is, to provide a strong analysis of the case.

Something to consider when writing existing strengths and existing safety/wellbeing or success, do these statements mitigate the worries and harm that are evident?

### Words and pictures

The practitioner will work with the parents to create the words and pictures (their story) for their child. The words and pictures are a professionally drafted explanation, that are developed with the family, we ask questions to the parent/carer about how they talk about their difficulties and what they think is vital for their child to understand, what questions the child has asked of them and what they think the child may have overheard. Some parents may not always agree with the worries of the practitioner and what needs to be included in the words and pictures. It is important that the practitioner can articulate to the family what worries they need to see explained and why this is important for the child to know. The child is also asked questions to ascertain what they want answered, this story is for them and shouldn't be about what professionals think they want answered.

Words and pictures explain to the child who is worried, what they are worried about and what will be happening in the future to keep them safe.

The words and pictures are shared with the naturally connected network, so everyone is informed about the worries. In safety planning everyone needs to be aware of the worries so that they can share what they will do when the worries arise.

### [Supporting practitioners to embed Signs of Safety Practice](#)

**Group Supervision** is essential for embedding Signs of Safety practice, each group supervision will focus on a Signs of Safety practice tool. Group Supervision gives workers the forum to share a particular case or piece of work. They will explain what they want to achieve from the session, the group will individually work on their best questions or examples, then share them with the group. Then the practitioner can then use these with the child/family. Group Supervision creates a learning culture and allows practitioners to share their knowledge and skills. Practitioners find it beneficial receiving ideas from other worker's perspectives.

**Appreciative Inquiry** is a set of questions which help us to identify the good aspects of a piece of practice, what a worker has done to achieve this and what the impact has been, we learn from this which supports our future practice. Appreciative inquiry is a way to focus on what is positive in any given situation, once the positive is defined and the reasons why that was positive, we then shift our focus to how we can grow and evolve from this information. Appreciative Inquiries can be used in any setting with any professional including foster carers.

**All practice guidance: training and examples are available on the Signs of Safety Share Point – [Signs of Safety - SharePoint](#)**