

## **Core groups in effective partnership working**

Improving inter agency work as a way of protecting children was viewed as important as early as 1945 when the inquiry into the death of Dennis O'Neill (Home Office 1945). Since the early 1970's it has continued to be significant in reports on the deaths of abused children, the most recent reports in to the death of Victoria Climbe and Caleb Ness appears to be no exception.

All inquiries into child death or into the significant injuries have found multi agency working a weakness. A major part of this weakness has been a failure of communication by agencies involved in working with children. Despite number of legislative powers, guidance and protocols, this continues to remain an area of concern.

### **Introduction**

Core group meetings are an essential part of multi agency planning process. 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.

It is important to acknowledge that professionals can only work together to protect children if there is relevant exchange of information and ownership of the child protection plan. Therefore it is critical that core groups are established as a way of ensuring that multi agency communication and exchange of information takes place regularly.

Accordingly, core groups have the following key principles:

- Multi agency working and multi agency effective communication
- Working in partnership with parents
- Professional accountability
- Integrity, openness and honesty between agencies.
- Promoting child centred approach and giving voice to the child.
- Commitment to ensure protection.

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- Should work towards evidenced, measurable change.

### **Function of core groups**

It is essential that there is a clear understanding of the functions of the core group.

The core group is responsible for developing and implementing the child protection plan as a detailed working tool, taking forward the plan that was agreed at the initial child protection conference.

### **Membership of core groups**

Careful consideration should be given to who should attend and their contribution to the child protection plan. Membership should include the key worker, who leads the core group, the child if appropriate, family members if appropriate, and professionals or foster carers who will have direct contact with the family. Although the key worker has the lead role, all members of the core group are jointly responsible for the formulation and implementation of the child protection plan, refining the plan as needed, and monitoring progress against specified objectives in the plan. (DH et al. Working Together, 1999: 57/58)

Following a child's name being placed on the child protection register, it is a responsibility of the conference to identify:

- The membership of a core group of professionals and family members who will develop and implement the child protection plan.

The membership should include

- A key worker-who leads a core group
- The child (where this is age appropriate)
- Family members. Should parents and carers decline to engage in this process, it is imperative that the core group meetings must still be convened and attended by involved professionals. The key worker should ensure that the minutes of the meeting are shared with parents.
- Professionals. This can include Health Visitors, Youth Action Services, Police, Teachers (or designated child protection officer from Education), school nurse, any other relevant professionals involved in the case.
- Voluntary sector services if involved.

### **Chairing of the Core Group**

When a Child Protection case conference decides that a child's name should be placed on the register, a key worker is appointed to co-ordinate future intervention. Given that Social Work Services have a lead responsibility for

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child protection cases, it is viewed that the appointed key worker or other nominated person from the same department, is nominated to chair the core group meetings.

### **Minutes of Core Groups**

A written record of all core group meetings must be completed on an agreed format, including intervention agreed and decision taken. The minutes should be signed by the chair of the core group and the team manager/senior social worker.

The minutes must be distributed to all members of the core group as identified by the initial case conference, along with the child protection conference chair and the relevant team manager.

The minutes should also be shared with the parents and child (where this is age appropriate)

Should there be any significant disagreement at a core group meeting, this should be shared with the team manager/senior social worker and should also be brought to the attention of chair of the conference.

### **Time Scale/Frequency**

The first meeting of the group should take place within seven working days of the initial child protection case conference. This meeting should provide any necessary further detail to the child protection plan.

It is recommended that at least two further core group meetings should take place before the review conference (which takes place after the three months of initial case conference). It is anticipated that the third core group meeting should enable a comprehensive assessment for the review meeting.

Should the child remain on the child protection register following the review conference, it is anticipated that the core group will continue to meet at least once in every six weeks.

### **Review Conference**

The review conference should receive an assessment report with recommendations as agreed by core group members. These recommendations must be evidenced and clearly analysed, addressing risk and protective factors. If continued registration is recommended, a suggested child protection plan should be included, with identified tasks, detailing: who is responsible; timescales; and the intended outcomes to reduce risk. The comprehensive assessment should be shared with parents and child (where age appropriate) prior to the review conference.

Effective core group working will ensure that the review conferences are child and decision focused.

### **Child Focus**

Many child protection inquiries have identified that the child's voice was missing from the assessment process and case management. Case audits have identified similar difficulties. However, where core groups have been an established way of practice, it is evident that the voice of the child has been central throughout the intervention process.

The principal aim of the core group is to ensure that the child/ren are protected and that their welfare is promoted. Where possible the child or the young person must be consulted about their opinions and views. This must be taken into consideration and discussed with all members of the core group.