

Resolving Multi-Agency Professional Disagreements and Escalation

Amended April 2021



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See also [Complaints and Appeals \(Child Protection Conferences\)](#) for parents, carers and children to complain about or appeal against a Child Protection Conference decision

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1. Introduction

When working in the arena of safeguarding children and young people, it is inevitable that at times there will be professional disagreement between agencies. Whilst this is accepted, it is vital that such differences do not affect the outcomes for children and young people. Professional disagreement is only dysfunctional if not resolved in a constructive and timely fashion. This procedure, therefore, provides a process for resolving professional differences between agencies.

Disagreements could arise in a number of areas of multi-agency working as well as within single-agency working, but are most likely to arise in relation to:

- Criteria for referrals;
- Outcomes of assessments;
- Roles and responsibilities of workers;
- Service provision;
- Information sharing and communication.

Disagreement may relate to decisions about individual children or specific processes. This procedure focuses on disputes between agencies relating to individual children and is applicable to all agencies, including the voluntary, community and the faith (VCF) sectors.

2. Principles of Resolving Professional Disagreements

- The safety and wellbeing of individual children / young people is the paramount consideration in any professional disagreement. Professional disputes obscuring focus on the child / young person must be avoided.

- It should be recognised that professional disagreement should not always be viewed negatively, if it improves outcomes for children and young people in a timely and sensitive manner, and learning for the practitioners involved.
- All professionals should take responsibility for their own cases, and their actions in relation to such case work.
- When there are disagreements between agencies, this should be recognised as potential for healthy debate. **The purpose of this policy is to facilitate resolution of operational disagreement where an agency considers that there will be a negative impact on a child's well-being.**
- **Difficulties at practitioner / fieldworker level between agencies should be resolved as simply and quickly as possible between the practitioners concerned.** If this is unsuccessful, the challenging agency should formally communicate that this policy will be implemented, and details escalated to the challenging agency's Line Manager and/or Safeguarding Lead to agree and record.
- All practitioners should respect the views of others, whatever their level of experience. They should also be mindful of the difficulties that challenging more senior or experienced practitioners may present to others.
- Working together effectively depends on an open approach and honest relationships between agencies. It also depends on resolving disagreements to the satisfaction of workers and agencies, with a genuine commitment to partnership.
- Attempts at problem resolution may leave one worker / agency believing that the child / young person remains at risk of **Significant Harm**. This person / agency has responsibility for communicating such concerns through line management and/or the Safeguard Leads for the organisations involved.
- Disagreements can be resolved at any stage however it is the responsibility of all the agencies involved to achieve the best outcome for the child.
- To avoid delay, it is expected that disputes are resolved quickly at the lowest level and if escalated, each step in this process should not exceed **5 working days**.

3. Process of Resolving Professional Disagreements

The following stages are likely to be involved:

- Recognition that there is a disagreement over a significant issue in relation to the safety and wellbeing of a child / young person;
- Identification of the problem;
- Possible cause of the problem; and
- What needs to be achieved in order for it to be resolved.

See the **Resolving Professional Disagreements flow chart** below which provides an outline of the complete process involved in resolving differences.

Step 1

The process of resolving professional differences should first involve workers consulting co-workers, to clarify their thinking and practice in the first instance, for example, via a professionals meeting, discussion with the Safeguarding Lead or other meeting which promotes reflection, using an appropriate practice tool where available, such as the [Bradford Continuum of Need and Risk](#).

In some voluntary, community or faith sector organisations, the role of a Senior Manager, as specified in the flow chart below, may be undertaken by a member of the management committee.

Step 2

The following should be considered when undergoing a process of resolving professional differences:

- a. Initial attempts to resolve the problem should normally be made between the people who have the original disagreement and as the dispute is identified, unless the child / young person is at immediate or significant risk;
- b. Both agencies should give clear reason/s for their safeguarding concerns and approach, which should be put in writing and where required clearly recorded as a formal challenge, as per guidance from their Line Manager and/or Safeguarding Lead
- c. It should be recognised that differences in status and / or experience may affect the confidence of some workers in resolving differences, and some may need support from their managers and/or Safeguarding Lead;

Step 3

- d. If unresolved, the problem should be referred to the worker's own line manager or agency safeguarding lead (challenging agency), who will discuss the situation with their equivalent colleague in the other agency;

Step 4

- e. If the problem remains unresolved, the line manager or agency safeguarding lead of the challenging agency will liaise with the relevant Service Manager or refer up their agency line management structure. This may be the management committee if in a VCF sector organisation or Designated Safeguarding Lead who will liaise with the relevant Service Manager;

Step 5

- f. If the issue is not resolved and professional differences remain, the matter **must** be referred to the Heads of Service (or most appropriate management committee member, commissioner or funding body¹) for each agency involved;

¹ For example, in the case of a sole proprietor or self-employed individual

Step 6

- g. In the unlikely event that the issue remains unresolved by the steps described above and/or the discussions raise significant policy issues, the matter should be referred urgently to The Bradford Partnership (TBP) Board Manager who will determine a course of action including reporting to the TBP Chair for resolution.

At all stages, a clear record of the progress of the dispute should be kept by all parties on each agency's child's file. This must include written confirmation between the parties about an agreed outcome of the disagreement and how any outstanding issues will be pursued. Where applicable records should be shared with the TBP, collated and considered to aid learning and improvement.

It is imperative that this process should fit within the child's timescale. Timely action is paramount if there are concerns that a child or young person is at risk.

4. Child Protection Conferences

4.1 Dissent about Need for Child Protection Conference

The decision whether or not to convene an [Initial Child Protection Conferences](#) rests with Children's Social Care Services. However, those professionals and agencies who are most involved with the child and family, and those who have taken part in a [Section 47 Enquiry](#), have the right to request that Children's Social Care Services convene a Child Protection Conference if they have serious concerns that a child's welfare may not otherwise be adequately safeguarded.

Any such request that is supported by a senior manager, or a Designated or Named Professional, should normally be agreed. Where there remain differences of view over the necessity for a conference in a specific case, every effort should be made to resolve them through discussion and explanation.

4.2 Dissent at Child Protection Conferences

If a Child Protection Conference Chair is unable to achieve a consensus as to the need for a **Child Protection Plan**, s/he will make a decision and note any dissenting views. This will include the situation where there is no majority view and where the Conference Chair exercises his or her decision making powers as set out in Section 13.4 of [Initial Child Protection Conferences](#). The agency or individual who dissents from the Chair's decision must determine whether s/he wishes to further challenge the result using the procedure described in this document.

5. Following Resolution

To avoid similar professional conflicts arising again, amendments may be required to protocol and procedures.

It may also be helpful for individuals to debrief following some disputes, in order to promote continuing good working relationships.

6. Resolving Professional Disagreements Flowchart

The process below does not have to be followed in full. Disagreements can be resolved at any stage.

