

## **Virtual Child Protection Conferences: Response to Covid-19**

### **Key points**

- The current situation makes it impossible to hold conferences in the normal way
- Unfortunately our very positive conference pilot and associated values will need to be temporarily abandoned as that model requires the type of work we should currently be avoiding. We should still try wherever we can to include parents and ensure their views are fully represented.
- Although the current situation presents difficulties with including parents we are adapting and we continue to do the best we can.
- In order for virtual conferences to have the best chance of success preparation is key.
- These are guidelines- CPA's can share good practice with each other and you will want to adapt these suggestions so that they work with each individual family.

### **Preparing for a virtual conference**

- At this time we should really only be bringing cases to conference where we believe a cp plan is needed in order to ensure childrens' safety.
- As we are unable to provide the usual levels of service provision and monitoring we need to be clear about we can do to protect and safeguard
- The virtual conference should really be a process of endorsement. It's a lot harder to have debates and discussions in virtual conferences so for the time being you should feel fairly certain that a child needs to be made subject to a plan.
- Risks should have been identified clearly beforehand and shared with parents. The CPA must also be very clear of the risk and should agree that a virtual conference will be purposeful

- Holding a conference when there is any confusion is likely to make for a messy discussion that's hard to manage and confusing for parents
- We should have all the agency information we need beforehand and feel fairly sure other professionals agree about risk. Agency reports should still be sent to facilitators by e-mail before the meeting, in the same way they are now.
- The SW/ and or chair should let our partners know what we are doing in response to the current situation so they are prepared. The Head of Service will also be sending out guidelines to our partners
- The chair should ensure all the elements of preparation is done beforehand so everything can run as smoothly as possible.
- We should have a written social work assessment which will help the chair maintain focus in the meeting. Because of these challenging circumstances we really need the assessment to have been shared beforehand with parents.
- The SW should decide who should be 'present' and in the normal way advise the conference facilitators of the invite list. Try and keep this to a reasonable minimum. The more people we have dialling in the harder it is to manage the meeting
- The most effective system for managing a virtual conference has been the conference dial-in system. Parents can dial in on their phones if necessary and should be given financial assistance where it's needed
- Conference facilitators can ensure that all professionals understand the conference call system so as to minimise difficulties once the meeting gets going
- The chair can and should still check in with parents by phone prior to the conference. It's also suggested that where appropriate chairs also do this after the conference to ensure parents have understood what was said and also what is expected of them
- Ideally we should be starting to put a limited plan together before the meeting. The meeting can run more smoothly and efficiently if the family have already been supported to consider what they can do to minimise risk. Equally important is that the social worker is clear what we as an agency can offer. This is severely limited at the moment so plans should be short, realistic, manageable for all, and should pay attention to those elements of safeguarding which are most pressing.
- We should not be encouraging families to attend face to face meetings
- The advocacy service remains operational, again the advocate can contact children and young people by phone or video link. Sarah Mail and Lorraine Emmanuel can be contacted for a consultation -they will be able to consider what can be offered in terms of advocacy on a case by case basis.

- If a family require an interpreter this poses a challenge for the virtual conference. The interpreter should of course be used before-hand to share concerns with parents but holding a virtual conference with an interpreter is likely to prove difficult. However a decision should be made on a case by case basis.

### **The Conference**

- Social worker and chair to introduce the meeting and outline the concerns. If parents are 'present' they should respond and state their views. There will probably be differences of opinion and parents may well become angry and emotional. This will need to be managed and supported as best as can be virtually.
- Those dialling in should be encouraged to share their concerns and views and parents be given an opportunity to respond
- Ideally we want to work towards some sort of negotiated agreement.
- Hopefully by the time you get to the virtual conference there should be some sort of plan already started. We should endeavour to look to parents to do what they think they can to minimise risk and address concerns. The social worker should be clear what they want from the plan and what they can offer the family.
- Chairs may feel it's appropriate to send out a therapeutic letter after the conference, acknowledging the difficult circumstances and thanking the family for bearing with us etc

### **Getting the plan out**

- The plan will be sent to professionals in the usual way, via secure email.
- The plan and minutes will be drawn up as a word document, with all identifying detail removed, such as names and address, and replaced with initials only. This will need to be password protected and sent to parents by email.
- **All sensitive information in the minutes (for DV cases) will be redacted for both parents to ensure that we do not increase risks to victims who may be living with perpetrators. SW and CPA's to advise victims of this**

### **Contingency**

If a virtual conference is unable to proceed due the unavailability of professionals and parents, the following will take place:

- SW and CPA to discuss the case, concerns, safety plans, and for RCPC's the progress of plans and any new risks and information. SW and CPA will create/update the safety plan. Conference Coordinator will be part of this virtual meeting, take notes and write up plan.
- SW and CPA to try and hold a video or audio meeting with the parents to discuss current assessment/analysis and safety plan
- Safety plan to be circulated to parents and professionals as above

#### Issues to consider

- Video conference calls are not suitable for large meetings and the connections can be unreliable.  
Audio conference calling is more reliable.
- Not all parents will have Whatsapp on their phones  
SW will need to ensure parents can download the app
- Parents may not have enough data/money on their phones or be able to afford to top up their phones  
Parents will need to be provided with top up cards or be given financial support to enable them to participate in a virtual conference

Sarah Mangold  
26/3/20