



Multi Agency Briefing

What North Ayrshire Families Say About Child Protection Services

May 2015

Introduction

“Listen more, judge less” is the key learning message from parents/carers of children and young people on the child protection register.

In addition to telling us what is working well in terms of families’ involvement in child protection processes, listening more to what is important to individuals and being open about the evidence base for judgements, are the areas where families would like child protection services to improve.

What We Did

Children and young people who are currently on the child protection register, and their parents/carers, were contacted by sessional staff who are not part of the child protection services being delivered, and asked four set questions, plus an open question at the end about how services could be improved.

The four questions asked were:

1. How well do you feel you understand what is happening and why?
2. How well do you feel staff have explained what meetings are taking place and what will happen at these meetings?
3. How well do you feel staff have listened to, and taken seriously, your views and feelings?
4. How well do you understand the decisions and plans that have been made for you?

What We Found – Responses to Questions

Parents/Carers Response to Question One:

57% of parents/carers said they understood what was happening **“very well”**, with a further **25%** saying they understood **“quite well”**. **18%** said that what was happening was **“not well”** understood.

Those who said they didn’t feel they understood what was happening made reference to **misunderstandings** about what they thought would happen and to frustration about not having the level of communication they might wish. One parent/carer commented that she/he didn’t understand some of the terminology used.

Parents/Carers Response to Question Two:

48% of parents/carers felt that meetings had been explained “**very well**”, with a further **41%** answering “**quite well**” to this question. **9%** answered “**not well**”.

Comments from parents/carers in response to this question highlighted that they appreciated verbal explanations and **discussions where they could ask questions to clarify understanding**. Some parents/carers who answered that staff had not explained the meetings well indicated that they would like **more detail** and **more time** for explanation and preparation.

Parents/Carers Response to Question Three:

Only **25%** of parents/carers felt their views were listened to “**very well**”, with **39%** answering “**quite well**” and **32%** answering that they felt their views were “**not well**” listened to nor taken seriously.

Comments from parents/carers in response to this question indicate that some parents feel that not everything is listened to equally, or given the weight that they would like. For instance, some parents feel **more weight is given to concerns and negative issues** as opposed to strengths and positives. Some parents feel not enough weight is given to the things most important to them – for example, contact with their children.

Parents/Carers Response to Question Four:

57% of parents/carers stated they understood decisions and plans “**very well**” with a further **27%** stating they understood “quite well”. **9%** answered “**not well**” to this question.

Comments from parents/carers highlighted that clear explanations from staff, particularly social workers, is key to this. Parents/carers were able to differentiate between *not agreeing* with plans/decisions and *understanding* plans/decisions.

Responses from children and young people:

Children and young people told us that they **generally understand what is going on “quite well”** and **most feel listened to and taken seriously**. **Fewer understand decisions and plans** and there is room for **improvement in relation to explaining meetings** in sufficient detail to children and young people.

When asked an open question about what more could be done to improve child protection services, many parents/carers responded that they were very satisfied with services and could identify no need for improvement. The following comments are an example of this:

“The service I got was amazing. I think what you do is unbelievable and I am very grateful”

“Staff have been brilliant, wouldn’t change anything”

What We Found – What Needs to Improve

“Listen more, judge less”

This was the general message conveyed by parents/carers of children on the child protection register when asked how services could be improved.

Many parents commented that they felt things that were important to them were not given due time and attention. They also felt that more time was spent focusing on negative matters than positive ones.

Sometimes this contributed to misunderstandings on the part of parents about what they could expect in terms of decisions and outcomes. For instance, several parents expressed frustration about the amount or nature of contact with a child who was living away from them.

It may be that we underestimate the need for parents to express views and process topics at their own pace and that perhaps when their focus is different from that of the practitioner, the practitioner needs to invest some more time in listening to the parents perspective before re-focusing them on the matter at hand.

This will always be a difficult balance for practitioners charged with keeping the child at the centre and making decisions about level and nature of risk on a daily basis. We know many parents will consciously try and deflect attention from concerns about their child by focusing on their own needs and practitioners need to work hard to maintain the focus on the child. But this is a reminder that, perhaps, by **listening more** to those we are trying to support in caring safely for their child, we may build a better working relationship, with fewer misunderstandings and a greater sense of being heard.

In relation to “**judge less**”, there were several comments by parents/carers about feeling judged by people who didn’t know them or being judged based on information they felt was incomplete or incorrect.

Professional judgement is integral to effective child protection practice. Child protection centres around “risk of significant harm” and this can only be determined by collective professional judgement.

The message from parents/carers echoes good practice findings – judgements should be based on evidence. This is about gathering information from all available sources, checking its validity as well as what it means in terms of impact on the child and using this analysis to inform decision making.

This message is perhaps a reminder of the extremely sensitive nature of child protection as it necessarily means there is concern about a parent’s ability to undertake the most fundamental of parenting tasks – protect their child. To help parents accept this judgement, we need to be clear and transparent with our evidence.

“Be more understanding. Nobody is perfect, I feel I have been judged”

“Listen, don’t judge, know all the facts, don’t make the decision before the meeting, don’t make us feel we are in a court of law, get to know us, make us aware that others will find out information about our past, we thought it was between us and the social worker then people at the meeting were reading about it”

Summary Findings

1. Most parents and carers do feel they understand the child protection process and the decisions and plans that are being made.
2. Understanding decisions and plans is the area most parents/carers feel most confident about.
3. Child protection meetings could be explained a bit better to both parents/carers and children/young people.
4. Children and young people generally understand what is going on “quite well”.
5. Most children and young people feel listened to and taken seriously.
6. Some children and young people do not sufficiently understand decisions and plans.
7. Parents and carers would like staff to listen more to the issues that are important to them.
8. Parents and carers would like staff to give equal weight to positive and negative issues.
9. Parents and carers resent judgements more when they perceive these to be made by people who don't know them well or based on information they believe to be incorrect or weighted towards negative issues.

Summary Learning Points:

- Give families more time to understand, reflect and consider the child protection process, the information shared and the decisions made.
- Ensure judgements are evidence based and share these as openly and transparently with families as possible.
- Spend a bit more time with parents/carers and children/young people specifically in relation to explaining child protection conferences.
- Actively listen to families to ensure they feel all viewpoints, concerns and pieces of information are taken into account in assessment and decision-making.

What We Will Do Next

The families who provided feedback will receive a written newsletter, summarising what they have said about services and how we will use their views to improve services.

The key messages within this briefing paper will be widely disseminated and all teams within services which contribute to protecting children and young people will be asked to reflect on these findings and consider how best to incorporate these into practice.

Our learning and development programme will be informed by these messages from families and, in particular, our next PRISM will include this piece of work as part of its focus.