**FEEDBACK FROM OSCB CHALLENGE EVENT**

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This feedback draws on:

* Oxfordshire Neglect Strategy 2020-2023
* Neglect guidance and practice tools
* Presentations delivered at the OSCB challenge event
* Neglect: international and national research and practice developments.

**Background**

OSCB has made considerable progress in both identifying and working with children and families affected by child neglect. Of note are:

* Not only the development of services, systems and process to improve practice in relation to neglect but also securing a multi-agency cultural shift in terms of perception of and response to neglect.
* Increased recognition by all OSCB partners of their roles and responsibilities vis a vis identifying neglect and the willingness of partners to engage at both management and practitioner level in tackling neglect. Moreover, a strategy is now in place to ensure those groups of practitioners who are not as engaged as others are made aware of their roles and supported to implement them.
* The development of training and supervisory practice designed to support practitioners and supervisors and develop their knowledge and skills.
* A strong emphasis on addressing emerging concerns through early help assessments and provision. For example, a recognition of the link between school attendance and neglect and the resulting emphasis on securing high levels of attendance amongst vulnerable young people.
* Embedding the lived experience of the child into practice.
* Acknowledging family strengths.
* The focus on SMART, child-focused plans that recognise that neglect cannot be addressed in a short period of time.

**Areas for Further Development**

Whilst the Partnership has made considerable progress in tackling child neglect, practice could be further enhanced by considering the following:

1. *Use of language*

The use of language and interpretation was an issue highlighted during the challenge event. For example, the implications of terminology such as ‘family difficult or refusing to engage’ on relationships between practitioners and families was recognised. There is however a more fundamental term that is routinely used by staff that can alienate families - that is the word ‘neglect’ itself. It a very emotive term with negative connotations particularly when linked to ‘failure to meet the needs of the child’ as in the *Working Together* definition. This definition, according to the Guidance should be used at child protection conferences to determine whether the child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm and requires a child protection plan. It is arguable whether it is the best definition to use in the conference arena as its use can alienate parents, but Guidance gives staff little choice. However, it useful using this term when considering emerging concerns and identifying the need for early help services? Would it be better to use language such as the parent or carer is unable to meet the needs of the child? The advantages of using an alternative term are:

1. It can be less emotive and alienating to families.
2. Attention is more likely to be on the impact on the child rather than labelling the form of neglect the child experiences.
3. It leads to a more sensitive exploration as to why the parent is unable to meet some of the needs of the child.

**Reflection**

Consider how language associated with neglect is used in Oxfordshire and the implications for practice.

1. *Recognising the impact of neglect on the individual child*

2.i) A child-centred approach to practice is more likely to be achieved if staff consider the lived experience of the child. This is very clearly emphasised in the strategy, guidance and tools. However, making sense of the lived experience of a young person is much more than just obtaining an overview of what the child does - from when they wake up to when they go to sleep. More important than establishing what a day or week is like for the child, is how they feel about those daily experiences and the impact this can have on their behaviour. For example, how does a young child feel about constantly arriving late for school or having several absences? How does it affect their school day? What would they like to see change? If practitioners utilise tools routinely such as the daily clocks and weekly suns a formulaic approach can become embedded. As one child put it ‘*the three-house lady is coming to see me again to do more houses’.* Utilising the same tools may become boring for the child and may not be the best way to elicit information.

**Reflection 2.i:** Consider:

* Is a more sophisticated approach necessary to understand the lived experience of the child and its impact?
* Should more emphasis be given to who is best placed to obtain this information?
* Can a more diverse range of approaches be utilised to engage with children of different ages and abilities could also be developed? During the recent Pandemic, for example, practitioners developed virtual ways of learning about the lived experience of the child, their wishes and feelings. These approaches have been found to be positively received by young people who often find communication through electronic devices can be easier than face to face meetings.

2.ii) Whilst attention has been given in both the strategy and practice guidance to children with disabilities, there are other groups of children who are particularly vulnerable to neglect whose needs are often overlooked. This includes:

* Children from higher socio-economic groups
* Those who are quiet and withdrawn and often considered to be ‘resilient’ by practitioners particularly if they are in large families where the other children are exhibiting challenging behaviour
* Children and young people with BAME background
* Young people whose sexuality and gender identity is neglected
* Those who are siblings of children with disabilities whose needs become marginalised because of the attention paid to their sibling with disabilities

**Reflection 2.ii:** Training and practice guidance could be developed to ensure staff have the knowledge and skills to identify and work with these marginalised groups of children and their families.

2.iii) The guidance for practitioners appears to focus primarily on physical neglect. For example, guidance and examples on undertaking home visits. Moreover, the tools provided to accompany the guidance focus on particular elements of neglect. The consequence is that a holistic approach to recognising different unmet needs may not take place. For example, how does neglect impact on the identity of the child and their social relationships?

**Reflection 2.iii:** Additional guidance may be useful ensuring that all the developmental needs of the child are considered when exploring the impact of neglect.

1. *Recognising the complex lives of parents and carers*

As indicated above, establishing the lived experience of the child appears to be embedded in practice in Oxfordshire. However, this only identifies, along with other assessments, *which* of the needs of the child are not being met. If staff are to consider *why* these needs are not met, then it is crucial that they establish what the lived experience of each parent or carer is like. It is only by understanding how parenting capacity, socio-economic factors and adult-orientated issues, such as drug misuse, impacts on the daily life of the parent that one can begin to appreciate why particular needs of the child are or are not being met. Moreover, as signalled above it is also important to establish how the individual feels about those daily experiences and what they would like to see change.

**Reflection:** Embedding knowledge of the daily lived experience of the parent/carer into routine practice is likely to increase understanding of the challenges faced by parents as well as their strengths. It also gives a message to parents that practitioners want to understand and address some of the barriers that are preventing them meeting all the needs of their child.

1. *Recognising factors that impact on parental engagement with services.*

It is apparent that the Partnership is promoting a restorative approach to practice and this should go a long way to promoting family engagement with agencies. However, a restorative approach can only be achieved if practitioners are encouraged to consider how they relate to families. This in my mind is a crucial supervisory task. Practitioners should be encouraged to reflect on:

* How their daily lived experience is impacting on their approach to practice. For example, being tired because they have been up all night with a restless baby.
* How they approach a visit. For example, are they rushed? Have they had sufficient time to prepare and do what they agreed to do? Are they tired and emotionally drained? All this impacts on the message staff give to families about value and respect and the serious nature of concerns.
* Use of language, for example terminology about neglect. If for example, a parent hears they are ‘failing’ to meet the needs of the child this may alienate the parent who becomes defensive or does not engage, thinking this is yet another thing they are no good at.
* Approaches to assessments and the use of tools. Tools and assessments must be fit for purpose and tailored to meet the individual needs of the parent so that they feel they are ‘doing with’ rather than ‘being done to’.
* How change of worker and the impact this has on the family is reflected in MACs.

**Reflection:** Should staff should be provided with opportunities within supervision to reflect on their daily lived experience and how this has impacts on the way in which they have engaged with children and families?

Training programmes could ensure opportunities are provided for participants to critically reflect on the way in which their daily lived experience impacts on that of the families they engage with.

1. *Use of tools*

There is no doubt that tools have a place in practice, but they should always be selected with a particular aim in mind. It is important therefore that practitioners consider:

* What is the issue or concern that I want to explore in this session?
* What do I know about the parent or child and the way they think and process information?
* Is the tool fit for purpose or will I need to adapt it?
* Is this tool something that a parent or child could relate to? For example would they understand the questions and why they are being asked them?

All too often parents and children feel that they are round pegs slotted into square holes. In other words that practitioners have standard tools they utilise, particularly for assessment, irrespective of the ability or motivation of the parent or child. As one parent said to me ‘*Here it comes again that \*\*\*\* triangle (Referring to the Framework for Assessing Children in Need and their Families’ (DoH et al; 2000)* Consequently, an individual may feel disempowered and believe that they are being ‘done to’ rather than the practitioner ‘working with’ them and recognising them as an individual. The tools currently available on the website are limited and therefore practitioners may well use the same tools time and time again, for example the childcare and development checklist, 3 houses, the wizard and fairy.

**Reflection:** The Partnership may wish to expand their suite of tools and ensure each tool has specific aims and objectives, methodology and possible adaptations included.