

Signs of Safety in Cheshire East

Putting children and young people first

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is Signs of Safety?

'Signs of Safety' is an innovative, strengths-based approach to working with children, young people and families. It provides a clear framework for how to build relationships with families and work effectively with them to achieve better outcomes for children and young people.

It was developed in Western Australia in the 1990s by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards. Andrew and Steve worked with over 150 frontline practitioners to develop and hone the approach, so it is based on **what practitioners know works well** in real life cases. It is now being used across the world.

The approach is based on a number of principles:

- 1. Working relationships are fundamental, with families and professionals.** Signs of Safety is about establishing positive, constructive relationships through recognising strengths as well as issues, being very clear about what our goals are, how we will work together to achieve these and what we expect to see, and having a common language everyone understands
- 2. Stance of critical inquiry** – accepting that professionals don't have all the answers, always being prepared to admit you may have had it wrong, and having a learning culture at all levels
- 3. Landing grand aspirations in everyday practice** – having big aspirations for children and young people and making sure we have the tools to deliver this everyday, listening and adapting the approach based on what practitioners say, and ensuring our service and organisation are truly focused on what matters - achieving better outcomes for children, young people and families

You can read more about the approach on the Signs of Safety website at www.SignsofSafety.net

Many professionals within Cheshire East will already be familiar with the Signs of Safety approach and how effective it is in engaging families, as our Child Protection Conference model is based on Signs of Safety.

Signs of Safety is a framework for **how** to work effectively with families, and it includes principles for practice, specialised training, ways of working (e.g. recognising strengths, how meetings are structured), tools for capturing the voice of the child or young person (e.g. the three houses tool), supervision that is aligned with the approach, and a process for auditing practice that promotes learning and reflection on the key aspects of Signs of Safety practice.

In Signs of Safety, robust analysis of strengths and risks leads to plans which focus on specific actions and behaviours that families must do to create an environment in which their children will be safe and can thrive - as opposed to just signalling what must stop. Where it has been adopted by other local authorities it has been welcomed by families. Families have reported that (often for the first time) they are clear about what services expect from them. Families particularly like that their views and strengths are acknowledged as well as their weaknesses understood.

2. Why are we adopting this?

We want to change the way we work to ensure that we **always** put children and young people **first and foremost** in everything that we do.

We know that what Eileen Munro (2011) found in her review of children's services is still true of our services in Cheshire East: services are too focused on compliance, see the assessment or the plan as the 'product' – instead of outcomes, and are overly bureaucratic. We want to transform our service to one that is 100% focused on achieving the right outcomes for children and young people.

For us, Signs of Safety embodies this, as it is focused on developing solutions in partnership **with** families **in response to what their children say is most affecting them**. As one practitioner says in [this video](#) – "There is no way you can forget about the children – in Signs of Safety that's what it's all about".

But what was also vital for us is choosing Signs of Safety as the right approach is that it is totally uncompromising in relation to recognising risk. Signs of Safety was developed for Social Work by social work practitioners, and that was also a key strength for us in relation to other models.

There is a clear evidence base that shows that **it works**, studies have shown that it results in:

- Better and more focused relationships with families
- Parents have a better understanding of the impact on their children, and their children's perspectives
- Practitioners are more clear on what the risks are, and what is expected of all parties, resulting in better decision making for families
- A more individualised approach for families
- Improved working between practitioners
- Reduction in the number of children brought into care
- Reduction in the time cases are open
- Increased morale of the social work workforce – because the work is focused on what they came into the profession to do

To add to all this, we also have the amazing opportunity to be part of a project with **37** other local authorities as part of the DfE Innovation Programme. These authorities are also all adopting, adapting and refining the approach throughout their service. If we are successful in our bid to the Programme, we will be able to benefit from the learning from these other authorities, and we will receive match funding from the DfE, which will allow us to train a much larger proportion of our staff and accelerate our implementation.

3. What do we want to achieve?

We have made major improvements to our services, and we want to continue to invest in the quality of our practice so that we can achieve the very best outcomes for **all** our children and young people. Best practice is child-focused, solution orientated, and respectful and inclusive of families, and this is what we want to achieve through adopting Signs of Safety.

Our aim is to make **every intervention count** so that children and families achieve effective and sustainable change. We also will be aligning our organisation to our practice – ensuring that we have the right structures, support and tools in place which enable us to always put children and young people first.

4. So what will be different?

Signs of Safety is a framework for **how** we work – so it will affect every element of our practice and how we do things – from our culture, to how we interact with families, how we conduct meetings, what we expect from families, what we record... it will affect just about everything we do! That might seem a bit scary – but we won't be changing everything at once, and there will be a controlled roll out of major changes.

We will be reclaiming our service to focus on what really matters – achieving fantastic outcomes for our children and young people. Every single person will know what we want to achieve, and how we will make this happen, and we will change our service so that it supports you to achieve this in every way possible.

There will be a project board and team leading changes around these work streams:

- **Training and Development** – developing, implementing and monitoring our training strategy for Signs of Safety, developing in house trainers, and aligning supervision and our core training offer.
- **SMART Recording** – streamlining what we record, and aligning the child's record system with Signs of Safety
- **Policies, Procedures and Practice Guidance** – ensuring there are good practice examples and resources to support you in using the approach, and adapting our policies and procedures so they reflect Signs of Safety
- **How it works in Practice** - the Practice Champions group will gather and represent their teams' views on Signs of Safety – what's working well and what we need to change, and will share good practice, and develop practice guidance and resources.
- **Involving Families** – families will be involved in developing a way for children, young people, parents and carers to feedback on how well we supported them, and will co-produce family friendly guides to our services
- **Evaluating Outcomes** – adopting the Signs of Safety audit process, ensuring we measure what matters in terms of performance, and evaluating the impact Signs of Safety is having for our families

If you want to be involved in leading and developing some of these changes please email us to let us know at ChildrensImprovement@cheshireeast.gov.uk. Whether you are curious and excited about Signs of Safety, already fully converted, or are really very unsure and sceptical, this is your opportunity to get in on the action and shape how it happens.

Signs of Safety is not a 'bolt on' or added extra to your work – it's how you will carry out the work you do now. Equally, using Signs of Safety depends on the skills and expertise you have within your profession, it isn't about forgetting what you have learned so far and starting again.

5. How widespread will we adopt it?/ If we don't get funding from the DfE innovation programme, how will implementation be different?

We want to adopt Signs of Safety as our one consistent way of working across all our services, across Children's Social Care and Early Help and Prevention. How widespread and how fast we can do this will depend on whether we are successful in receiving the funding from the DfE Innovation Programme, as this will allow us to train a much larger proportion of our workforce.

If we don't receive the funding we will still be implementing Signs of Safety, but we will need to prioritise our core services for early implementation and we will have to make more use of our in house trainers to reach more teams.

6. How does Signs of Safety fit with CAF/ 16+/ my service?

Signs of Safety has its origins in child protection work, but it is a way of working that readily adapts to working with families in a range of situations. Other local authorities have successfully adopted Signs of Safety more widely across children and families' services. For example in Suffolk, their early help offer is named 'Signs of Safety and Wellbeing' to emphasise that the focus at early help is not just about ensuring safety, and in Suffolk they have 'Signs of Success' for their youth probation service.

For services where the main focus is not the safety of the child, the same methods are used but are tailored to the focus of the work, so plans still focus on what's working well, what we're concerned about, what needs to happen, and use a scaling question. A scaling question for youth engagement services might be:

Success Scale: On a scale of 0 to 10 where 10 means your (the young person's) life is 'on track' to get where you want to go in life and 0 my life's a complete mess - where are you?

7. Will we be trained to use Signs of Safety?

Yes! Everyone will receive training before they are expected to use the approach. The training will be delivered by highly experienced trainers and consultants from the Signs of Safety Team. Partners will receive half day briefings on the approach so they understand what is expected of them as part of this way of working.

8. I'm worried about managing my workload while I adapt to a new way of working – how much time will it take and will it increase or decrease my workload?

Signs of Safety is not a 'bolt on' or added extra to your work – it just specifies **how** you will carry out the same work you do now. Adapting to something new always takes more time than just doing something you are already familiar with, so we do expect that initially it will take a bit longer to use the Signs of Safety approach. However, we hope that like other practitioners who have adopted it, you will find that it is interesting, rewarding, and in line with what you feel your work should be about, and most importantly – that it helps families to recognise and make changes, and results in better outcomes for children.

Signs of Safety is a concise and focused way of working, and other authorities have found that cases are resolved or moved on more quickly – as families are more engaged, risks are much better understood, and the work is much more focused. So as we become more experienced in using the model we expect that cases will remain open for less time which should create more time to spend with families. In the long term, we expect this approach to reduce demand to our high level services through making every intervention count and achieving sustainable outcomes for our families.

9. Will good case examples be available to support us?

Yes – and we'll identify these from our own good practice within our service.

10. Are partners on board? Will they get training too?

Partners will receive half day briefings on the approach so they understand what is expected of them as part of this way of working. All our strategic partner leads at the Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB) are aware that we will be adopting Signs of Safety.

LSCB groups such as the LSCB Board, LSCB Executive and LSCB Safeguarding Children Operational Group (SCOG) will be involved in how we implement Signs of Safety so we have a consistent approach across the partnership. Partners in Cheshire East have been very positive about the changes to our Child Protection Conference since we moved to our Signs of Safety inspired approach.

11. How will it work with the child's record system?

We will adapt the child's record system so that the forms reflect the Signs of Safety structure. We will also review how and what we record, and streamline this as much as possible, so we are getting the most impact from our time.

12. Will new staff joining the organisation at a later date still receive the training? Otherwise it won't be sustainable in the long term

Yes. Some people within the organisation will be trained to become Signs of Safety Trainers so that we can offer this training in house in the long term for new members of staff and as refresher training.

13. Is it time limited? What are the timescales for implementation?

We are expecting to hear from the DfE on whether we have been successful in our bid to the Innovation Programme at the end of January/ early February 2017. If we are successful, the timescales will be determined by the national Signs of Safety Project Team, but we would expect training to start in the spring of 2017.

Within two years, we expect to have trained the majority of our workforce and made the key changes to our organisation to support Signs of Safety. The bid to the DfE Innovation Programme covers a two year period.

14. What will it look like when we 'go live'?

As we move further into the New Year, you will start to receive regular communications from us updating you on where we are up to and what's happening. Once we have the first dates confirmed for the training we will let you know.

15. Will social workers/ other practitioners be able to be involved in developing the approach?

Yes – very much so, as it's got to work for you, otherwise it won't work at all. Views from teams will be sought and represented by the Practice Champions, who will troubleshoot and address any issues teams or individuals are having with Signs of Safety, as well as identify, share and celebrate examples of good practice. Partners will also be involved in developing the approach through the LSCB Safeguarding Children Operational Group (SCOG).

If you want to be involved in leading and developing some of these changes please email us to let us know at ChildrensImprovement@cheshireeast.gov.uk.

16. How will children, young people and families find out about this?

We will make information on Signs of Safety for families and other residents available on our website. We will be working with families to develop family friendly guides to our services so children, young people and families know what they can expect. We will also be developing a way of gaining regular feedback from children, young people, parents and carers on the quality of our services so we know what's working for families, and where and what we can improve.

17. How will we know if it is working?

We will collect information from a range of sources, including feedback from children, young people, parents and carers, feedback from practitioners and partners, audit findings and performance information. We will use these to evaluate how Signs of Safety is working for us throughout the project so we can respond to any areas which aren't working as well as we want them to. Ultimately we will judge our success by the outcomes we achieve for our children and young people.

18. Who will monitor the Project?

The project will be monitored by the Signs of Safety Project Board, which will be Chaired by Nigel Moorhouse, Director of Children's Social Care and Deputy Director of Children's Services, and consists of the Director of Prevention and Support and Heads of Services for Children's Social Care and Prevention. Progress updates will also be given to the Directorate Management Team, Corporate Parenting Committee and Local Safeguarding Children Board (LSCB).

If we are successful in our bid to the DfE Innovation Programme, the project will also be monitored by the DfE and the national Signs of Safety Team.

19. How will risks be managed when the approach is focused on strengths and building relationships?

Some professionals worry that a strength-based approach may underplay the seriousness of the risks involved. Signs of Safety is a very robust approach to assessing risk, and contains specific measures and methods to assess and communicate risk. One of the strengths of Signs of Safety as a model is that it makes the risks very explicit to families, and supports families to recognise the risks and be accountable for making changes for their children. All Signs of Safety plans include a 'danger statement' which makes it very clear what the concerns are and what the consequences of these could be for the child.

An example of a danger statement is included below:

Sally from Child Protection Services is worried that Merinda (mum) and Eddy (dad) will have fights where they scream, shout, swear, drive off with the kids in the car in a dangerous way and throw things at each other, and Darel, Alkira and/or Jirra (the children) will be really upset and frightened and maybe even get hurt like on Tuesday night when Alkira cut her foot badly on a glass that Merinda threw and broke during a heated fight with Eddy, or end up in a really bad car accident and die.

Sally from CPS is concerned that Eddy and Merinda will hit the children when they misbehave and cause bruises or worse.

Sally from CPS, Rose, Darel, Kerri and Pat (friends and family who are in the Safety Network) are worried that Darel, Alkira and Jirra will think it is ok to scream, shout, swear, throw things, hit,

drive dangerously, threaten, 'boot' people in the arm or kick people, because of Merinda and Eddy's behaviour and they will think that this is how you solve problems in life. If Darel, Alkira and Jirra do grow up doing these things they are more likely to have violent relationships, get into trouble with the Police and then have the same problems with their children in the future.

Tools for working with children and young people, such as the three houses model, gain the child's views on their worries, and these are presented to the parents. This enables parents to understand the impact of the risks on the child and provides them with real insight and incentive to change.

Another worry some people have is that by building relationships with a family they are in some way condoning the abuse. Signs of Safety argues that having a relationship with someone is essential in supporting them to recognise what needs to change, and enabling them to feel that they can then achieve those changes. Signs of Safety requires that professionals are very clear about the level of their concerns, and in no way would advocate that professionals condone or minimise the risks involved. It also requires that professionals are respectful of the families' views, recognise differences of opinion, and the families' strengths, as all families have strengths no matter what their deficits. Recognising strengths gives families and professionals something to explore and build on, and families report that this is key in enabling them to feel they can achieve changes for their children.

If you want to know more about Signs of Safety, check out the Signs of Safety website at www.SignsofSafety.net

If you have any questions about our implementation in Cheshire East you can contact a member of the project team at the email address below.

Contact us at:

ChildrensImprovement@cheshireeast.gov.uk

