

PROFESSIONAL ONLY MEETINGS

Background

In a number of recent Case Reviews it became apparent that it had not been possible for professionals to fully share relevant important information because of the presence of family members in meetings. It also became clear that there had been an over-reliance on believing information provided by parents to be the truth rather than seeking out the facts. Consideration should be given as to whether there is a need to convene a Professional Only Meeting in order to maintain focus on the child / young person.

Purpose of Professional Only Meetings

In addition to routine planning meetings, core groups, conferences and reviews there is a place for Professional Only Meetings to be held without family members being present. These can be useful at every level of Multi- Agency involvement. Where the meetings take place, they should be focused on outcomes for the child and family and form part of a continuous process of assessment, planning, implementation and review across all levels of need, including early help. They will facilitate quality assurance of the case and lead to staff being able to challenge families and one another openly and effectively. It is important to recognise that these meetings should supplement and not replace existing good practices of engaging family members in assessment and planning activity.

Professional Only Meetings provide an opportunity for agency representatives involved with a family to come together not only to share and analyse information, but also to plan effectively whilst maintaining a focus on the child. It may also resolve uncertainty, controversy or inter-agency disagreement when cases are failing to progress or starting to drift. They should also enable professionals to see the situation through the eyes of the child and will be helpful where there is complex family need and risk necessitating comprehensive interagency involvement. The risk of over-reliance on information supplied by family members, disguised compliance and resistant families will also be minimised.

It will be important to be honest with family members from the outset in order to maintain an open and honest relationship, unless to do so would put the child or young person at additional risk. Consequently it will usually be necessary to inform them during initial contact of the requirement for a professional only meeting and in circumstances where decisions have been made without family members being present, they should be communicated to the family as soon as possible afterwards. (See Records of Professional Meetings below). In certain circumstances, for example in cases of suspected fabricated illness, forced marriage, Section 47 child protection investigations etc, it will be necessary to hold a professionals only meeting before contacting the family.

Who can convene and review Professional Only Meetings?

Any Multi-Agency meeting convened to address a need or risk associated with levels 1 to 4 inclusive as described and illustrated in MSCB Multi-Agency Levels of Need (Threshold) Document must consider whether there is a need to hold a Professional Only Meeting, and this should be an item on the agenda. If a case becomes 'stuck' and is not progressing to universal services, escalation procedures should be used. Where a Professional Only Meeting is not convened, the rationale for this decision **must** be documented.

Any agency representative can ask for a professional only meeting to be convened at any stage of the intervention. When convened the meeting should include representatives from all agencies involved.

Individual services and agencies should have Practice Procedures in place to:

- Provide guidance on the appropriateness of holding a Professional Only Meeting at any level of Multi-Agency intervention.
- Ensure the conduct of professionals is consistent with their best practice standards and statutory requirements.

Chairing Professional Only Meetings

The professional regarded as leading or Chairing the intervention should ordinarily Chair the Professional Only Meeting. It will be permissible however for any other

experienced agency representative to Chair the meeting in the usual Chairs absence. In all cases, it should be decided which representative will be taking notes of the meeting, how they will be distributed and where they will stored in order that there is a shared understanding of purpose and intended outcomes. (See 'Records from Professional Only Meetings')

Attendance at Professional Only Meetings

Professionals involved in any protective, supportive or other measures designed to address need or risk associated with children and their families should attend.

Timing and Duration of Professional Only Meetings

The timing of the Professional Only Meeting will be a matter of judgement but will need to be held within a timescale that will influence potential plans and outcomes for the child and family.

Records from Professional Only Meetings

Records must be made of decisions and recommended actions following the Professional Only Meeting. The chair or lead professional will have responsibility for ensuring that this record is made and distributed to all appropriate parties. Decisions will be shared with the parents unless, exceptionally, the chair determines against this, for example where sharing of information would place a child or family member at risk of harm.

The chair or lead professional must secure the safe keeping of the record and take any necessary steps to ensure that the information contained in it is treated as confidential, subject only to any statutory provisions under which access to such a record or information may be obtained or any court order under which access may be obtained or given.

A Professional Only Meeting can be convened on more than one occasion if this is considered necessary.

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