



# **Implementing Signs of Safety in Brent**

A Scrutiny Task Group Report

**Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee**

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## **Chair's foreword**

In 2015 the Scrutiny Committee at Brent Council was challenged by Ofsted to give more consideration to children's social care and be questioning in a way that contributes to improving services. This report about Signs of Safety is a response to that challenge. Since the autumn last year the members of the task group have spent a considerable amount of time looking at how Signs of Safety is being introduced and practised in the local authority. We have talked with front-line social workers, practitioners, senior managers and met with the Strategic Director and Cabinet Member for Children and Young People to understand the department's approach to implementing Signs of Safety and what difference it has made to working with children and families in our borough.



The introduction of Signs of Safety is a priority for children's and young people's services in Brent. The model is recognised around the world as one of the leading frameworks for social work which should improve the safety of the borough's children who are most at risk of harm by working with them, their families and social networks in an innovative way.

As members we are aware of how charged the discussion of child protection can be and the complexity and difficulty in working with children and young people who may be at risk, and I would like to say that we were impressed by the commitment and dedication of the social workers we met. We were determined to have a balanced understanding of how well implementation has been done and what the challenges of introducing Signs of Safety have been. To put it in another way, we considered what are we worried about, what's working well, and what needs to happen?

I would like to thank all those who have contributed to the writing of this report, especially the front-line staff members in children's services who gave up their time.

**Councillor Aisha Hoda-Benn**

**Chair, Scrutiny task group**

## **Executive Summary**

The task group was set up to examine the effectiveness of the implementation of Signs of Safety by the Children and Young People's department in Brent since early 2015. The implementation of the practice framework, which is regarded as one of the world's leading models for child protection and working with families, is a flagship project and commitment for the department, in which considerable resources have been invested. Ultimately, Signs of Safety should improve the outcomes for children and families in the borough, and at its heart it is about making children who may be at risk of harm safer.

In the context of declining resources for local government and children's social care, the accessing of funding to introduce Signs of Safety has been a positive development, which Ofsted had remarked is leading to improvements in practice. It is creating a stable framework for practitioners to work and by using the model, practitioners are helping to make the department more child-centred, putting the children's voices to the fore, and making them involved in decision-making.

The task group found that social workers have been receptive to the practice model, and that they are positive about Signs of Safety. As a way of working with children and families, it is a good one because it is strengths based and seeks partnership in working with families. Signs of Safety is also well-suited to Brent and the borough's demographic profile. However, while the department has made considerable strides in implementation there is not as yet consistently good practice across all teams.

The task group has made four recommendations. These include that scrutiny will have a further role to play in monitoring the implementation of Signs of Safety, and that it's important there is thinking now about what long-term measurements there could be for evaluating Signs of Safety.

## **Recommendations:**

**Recommendation 1:** An engagement programme with partners such as schools, GPs and other health professionals is developed to help further raise awareness of Signs of Safety.

**Recommendation 2:** The effectiveness of training in Signs of Safety is monitored by using existing workplace surveys to benchmark effectiveness and highlight any issues which may prevent the proper development of training.

**Recommendation 3:** The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People updates scrutiny annually about progress in implementing Signs of Safety, including social worker retention and other factors which may affect development of the practice.

**Recommendation 4(a):** Measurements are developed for assessing how effective Signs of Safety has been in the long-term in improving outcomes for children and young people.

**Recommendation 4(b):** Brent works with other local authorities who use Signs of Safety to share information about developing measurements for assessing the effectiveness of the model.

## Methodology

The task group gathered qualitative and quantitative evidence to complete the report and develop its recommendations. In particular, the task group carried out a series of face-to-face interviews and meetings with those who are implementing Signs of Safety or are affected by this approach.

They included:

- front-line social workers
- social work managers
- Strategic Director Children and Young People
- Cabinet Member for Children and Young People.

In addition, the task group were also introduced to a case which social workers and managers had been working on using the Signs of Safety approach. The details of the case were anonymised so there could be no identification of the child or family by task group members.

The task group will also be able to review documentation regarding the impact of the Signs of Safety approach undertaken within the department.

The task group also requested quantitative information to inform its work and better understand the introduction of Signs of Safety. This included:

- the number of families and children supported by Early Help
- the number of families and children supported by Child Protection plans or Child in Need plans
- social worker numbers and staff turnover
- the ratio of agency or interim to permanent staff.

It also drew on the body of wider research into Signs of Safety to help develop the report and recommendations.

# Chapter 1 Signs of Safety

## History

1. Signs of Safety is an integrated framework for practitioners in children's services and child protection, incorporating principles, disciplines, tools for assessment and safety planning and engaging with children and families, and processes for working. <sup>1</sup> Fundamentally, Signs of Safety is about maximising safety and minimising risk to a child. The end goal is child safety, and the model is a means to achieving that end.

2. The framework was developed as a practice model by two social workers – Dr Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards – working in Western Australia during the 1990s. Steve Edwards had been a front-line practitioner of child protection for 16 years, often working among Aborigine communities in the state, when he began a collaboration in 1989 with Dr Andrew Turnell from which the core ideas of Signs of Safety emerged. In the late 1990s, Turnell and Edwards worked with 150 social workers in Western Australia to refine their approach to child protection and create the Signs of Safety model. <sup>2</sup>

2. The framework has subsequently been adopted by agencies and organisations in other parts of the world outside Australia, mainly in English-speaking countries such as Canada, the United States of America and United Kingdom, but also in Japan and the Netherlands. In 2014, it was estimated there were 41 local authorities practising Signs of Safety in the UK and the model was being used in 13 countries. The first international gathering of practitioners from around the world was held in England in 2005 and the most recent took place in Norwich in 2016. <sup>3</sup>

3. In 2014, the Department for Education in the United Kingdom awarded £4.8million under phase two of the children's social care Innovation Programme to an initiative involving ten local authorities in England, including the London Borough of Brent. The project is led by consultants Munro, Turnell & Murphy (MTM) and aims to improve the

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<sup>1</sup> Munro, Turnell and Murphy, 'Transforming Children's Services with Signs of Safety Practice at the Centre', August 2014, p3

<sup>2</sup> 'The Signs of Safety Child Protection Practice Framework', Government of Australia; Department of Child Protection, 2011, p6

<sup>3</sup> Munro, Turnell and Murphy, 'Transforming Children's Services with Signs of Safety Practice at the Centre', August 2014, p3



quality of work with children and families and achieve better outcomes by aligning practice, policies and procedures in children's services with Signs of Safety.<sup>4</sup>

5. Signs of Safety is a brand owned by the Resolutions Consultancy, which is led by Andrew Turnell and holds the international Signs of Safety trademark. Resolutions ensures that the brand is maintained to a high standard and licences training.<sup>5</sup>

## Principles

6. Constructive working relationships are key. Signs of Safety adopts a collaborative approach to working with families and children, aiming to nurture the residual strengths within a family to enhance a child's safety as well as address any risks or maltreatment. The model fosters a partnership and shared responsibility between a family unit and practitioners to create a mutually agreed understanding of what may need to change. Signs of Safety rejects the paternalistic approach of practitioners imposing solutions and instead enables the family, including its wider network, to create safety for a child. Constructive working relationships are a key principle not only between professionals and a family, but among professionals and agencies with whom a practitioner works, and should encourage a respectful and honest discussion of concerns or worries.<sup>6</sup>

7. Signs of Safety encourages practitioners to think critically, which means reflecting on what has worked and not worked and acknowledging when something is incorrect. This principle is also expressed by Professor Eileen Munro's maxim: 'The single most important factor in minimizing errors is to admit you may be wrong'.<sup>7</sup> Critical thinking requires balanced thinking about strengths and risks to avoid an overly negative or positive view; remaining open-minded and taking a more questioning approach.<sup>8</sup>

8. A third principle is that it is grounded in everyday practice. For example, when an assessment and safety planning are done they are based on a child's experiences, and practitioners' experiences and practice-led evidence are an engine of learning.

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<sup>4</sup> [www.gov.uk/government/speeches/edward-timpson-outlines-successful-innovation-programme-bids](http://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/edward-timpson-outlines-successful-innovation-programme-bids), 31 October 2014; [www.springconsortium.com/evidence-learning/how-projects-are-being-evaluated/#t9](http://www.springconsortium.com/evidence-learning/how-projects-are-being-evaluated/#t9)

<sup>5</sup> [resolutionsconsultancy.com/about-the-licensing-program](http://resolutionsconsultancy.com/about-the-licensing-program)

<sup>6</sup> Amanda Bunn, Signs of Safety in England, (NSPCC, 2013) p7; Munro, Turnell and Murphy, 'Transforming Children's Services with Signs of Safety Practice at the Centre', August 2014, p3

<sup>7</sup> Eileen Munro 'Effective Child Protection', 2008, p125

<sup>8</sup> Munro, Turnell and Murphy, 'Transforming Children's Services', August 2014, p3

## Disciplines

9. Signs of Safety encourages the use of disciplines to improve a practitioner's work. They include a clear understanding of past harm, future danger and complicating factors; being able to distinguish between strengths and protection; writing in clear specific language which is free from jargon and ambiguity; a focus on specific and observable behaviours rather than generalisations, and a skilful use of authority.<sup>9</sup>

## Tools

10. Signs of Safety has its own tools for risk assessment and care planning to map what danger or risk there may be as well as establishing the strengths within a family. They are used by practitioners together with the children and families and the network of people who support them and help to elicit in unambiguous language, the different views of concern or danger as well as the existing strengths and safety in a family.<sup>10</sup> The joint use of the tools by members of the family and a practitioner means that it is not just the professional's perspective which shapes assessment and planning.<sup>11</sup>

11. A favoured assessment tool which complements the disciplines is the Three Columns, which asks 'What are we worried about? (past harm, future danger, complicating factors)', 'What's working well? (existing strengths and safety)' and 'What needs to happen? (objectives for future safety and next steps to secure them).<sup>12</sup> It also asks a scaling question on a 0-10 scale to rate the immediate situation for a child.

12. The Signs of Safety model also has its own tools which allow a child's perspective about the issues and what has been happening to them to be expressed, these include: Three Houses, Wizards and Fairies, Safety House and Words and Pictures.<sup>13</sup>

13. Scaling questions are another technique favoured by Signs of Safety. That means asking a question requiring a fixed response on a scale of '1-10' rather than exacting generalised and ambiguous replies which contain little specific information. Scaling can be used in different settings as well as with partner organisations and agencies.

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<sup>9</sup> [www.dcp.wa.gov.au/Resources/Documents/SOS\\_Disciplines.pdf](http://www.dcp.wa.gov.au/Resources/Documents/SOS_Disciplines.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [www.signsofsafety.net/signs-of-safety-2/](http://www.signsofsafety.net/signs-of-safety-2/)

<sup>11</sup> [www.signsofsafety.net/signs-of-safety-2](http://www.signsofsafety.net/signs-of-safety-2)

<sup>12</sup> [www.westsussex.gov.uk/media/3180/signs\\_of\\_safety\\_overview.pdf](http://www.westsussex.gov.uk/media/3180/signs_of_safety_overview.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Amanda Bunn, Signs of Safety in England, (NSPCC, 2013) p9

## Research

14. Since the model was first developed in the 1990s research has been done by different organisations to understand the effects on child protection and social work. However, it should be noted that many of these studies were done outside the United Kingdom and in areas which are different in profile to the London Borough of Brent. On the whole, the research highlights a number of improvements in organisations which have adopted Signs of Safety as the practice framework for child protection. The benefits to practitioners have been improved morale and decision-making, and better relationships between them and the key professionals with whom they work while organisations have recorded reduced rates of child removal and the length of cases.<sup>14</sup>

15. Research based on social work in Minnesota in the United States identified long-term success benchmarks such as improved satisfaction among families and workforce retention, and reduced child protection interventions and court involvement. Short-term indicators of success were a marked change in professional philosophy, increased worker confidence in Signs of Safety, support in using the practice model from workers and supervisors, practice-sharing, and educating other partners in Signs of Safety.<sup>15</sup>

16. One of the largest studies in the United Kingdom was by the NSPCC in 2011 who interviewed practitioners in a number of local authorities which had introduced the model at that time. Generally, the practitioners interviewed thought Signs of Safety was particularly effective in child protection because it helps to create partnerships and good working relationships with parents, identifies risk and makes practitioners more specific in identifying issues. In addition, Signs of Safety was much more likely to engender change and action when working with families in comparison with other models.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> [www.signsofsafety.net/research](http://www.signsofsafety.net/research)

<sup>15</sup> Maggie Skrypek, Christa Otteson and Greg Owen, 'Signs of Safety in Minnesota: Early Indicators of Successful Implementation in Child Protection Agencies', Wilder Research December 2010, pp.26-34

<sup>16</sup> Amanda Bunn, Signs of Safety in England, (NSPCC, 2013) p123

## **Chapter 2 Brent's Context**

### **Children and Young People**

17. In Brent the population of children and young people aged 18 and under is rising. At present, there are an estimated 78,777 in that age group or 24.3% of the total population. <sup>17</sup>

18. Brent is one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse local authority areas in the UK. In the borough's primary schools 68.7% of children have English as an additional language; the figure in secondary schools is 55.2%. <sup>18</sup> The largest minority ethnic groups of children and young people in the borough are Asian/Asian British and Black African. About 75% of all under 18s in Brent are from minority ethnic groups.

19. The proportion of primary school children eligible for free school meals is 13% and at secondary schools in the borough 12.5% of pupils are entitled to free school meals.

20. The Index of Multiple Deprivation ranks Brent 55 out of 326 local authority areas in England measured by the number of neighbourhoods in the most deprived top 10%.

### **Children and Young People's Department**

21. The department, which is led by a Strategic Director, is integrated across children's services rather than split into separate units for children's social care and education. The present Cabinet member for Children and Young People started in May 2016 and holds one of eight posts, including the Leader and Deputy Leader, on the council's Cabinet.

22. The department has approximately 700 full-time staff. The majority are based at the civic centre although many operate from locality offices in different parts of Brent.

23. Approximately 167 social workers work in the department of whom about 65% are permanent. The majority of social workers are based in either the front-line locality teams, which cover Harlesden, Wembley, Willesden, Kingsbury and Kilburn, or in care planning. The high proportion of agency-employed social workers in some teams

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<sup>17</sup> Children and Young People Department, census mid-year estimate 2016

<sup>18</sup> Brent Council, Children and Young People Department, 3 December 2016

means staff turnover is high although this is little different to other boroughs in London. The department is committed to improving the ratio of agency staff to permanent social workers and started a recruitment campaign to increase permanent staff in 2016.<sup>19</sup>

24. The department works with a considerable number of children and young people. As of 31 March 2016 there were 676 children who had been referred through Early Help. In total, the number of children in need on 31 March 2016 was 1,900. This figure is for children who have been referred to Children's Services and are awaiting assessment, have been assessed and are subject of a Child In Need Plan, and children who are subject of a Child Protection Plan as well as looked after children.<sup>20</sup>

25. The department's spending has been reduced considerably. According to Budgets set by the local authority, in 2016/17 the gross expenditure for Children and Young People's Department was £46million; in 2015/16, it was £47million, in 2014/15 it was £49.8million; and in 2013/14 gross expenditure was £57.5million. These figures exclude the council's separate ring-fenced budget for expenditure on schools.<sup>21</sup> As the local authority's Revenue Support Grant from central government has been reduced other council departments have seen similar or greater spending reductions. However, the Children's and Young People department is facing a rising population of those aged 18 and under living in Brent, but its resources have been decreasing.

26. The council's proposed 2017/18 Budget, which at the time of writing the report was being consulted on with residents, is clear that a rising population of those aged 18 and under will mean additional costs to maintain services for children's social care. The draft Budget estimates that the population of 18s and under in the borough will rise by 1.0 to 1.2% a year in 2017/2018 and 2019/2020 which will mean estimated extra costs of providing children's social care of £0.4million in those financial years. That extra cost is to provide the same level of services to the population of that age category.<sup>22</sup> For young people who have contact with children's social care there is also rising complexity in issues around gangs and child sexual exploitation.

## **Brent and Signs of Safety**

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<sup>19</sup> 'Market Supplement for Children and Families Social Workers' Brent Council General Purposes Committee 31 March 2016

<sup>20</sup> Brent Council, Children and Young People Department, 3 December 2016

<sup>21</sup> Brent Council 'Brent Council Spending 2016-17' April 2016, pp.6-7; 'Brent Council Spending 2015-16' April 2015, p6; 'Brent Council Spending 2014-15' April 2014, p6

<sup>22</sup> Brent Council Cabinet 24 October 2016, 'Budget Proposals 2017-18 to 2018/19'

27. In 2012, Brent was one of the few London boroughs to introduce Signs of Safety. The department, which was then called Children and Families, implemented the model for the front-line staff working in children's social care, but the initiative was not effectively embedded and petered out.<sup>23</sup>

28. In 2014, Brent Council was invited by Professor Eileen Munro along with nine other local authorities to take part in the Signs of Safety project funded by the Department for Education's Innovation Programme. A commitment to the effective implementation of Signs of Safety was signed by the Chief Executive at the time and the Council Leader. The then Cabinet Member for Children and Young People also gave it her support.

29. From October 2014 to March 2016, Children and Young People worked with the MTM consultancy to introduce Signs of Safety as part of the Innovation Programme. MTM is led by Professor Eileen Munro, Dr Andrew Turnell and Terry Murphy. As part of working with MTM, Dr Turnell was the main contact.

30. The introduction of Signs of Safety is a corporate priority for the council. In June 2015, the council's Corporate Plan 2015/16, which monitors progress of the priorities in the Borough Plan 2015-2019, highlighted that Signs of Safety Implementation Plan will be delivered and monitored monthly to help improve the quality of social work practice.

31. Ofsted's (Single Inspection Framework) SIF inspection in November 2015 highlighted improvements from a limited introduction of Signs of Safety, finding that where social workers were using the model, assessments had fuller information, better analysis and a stronger focus on children's wishes, which led to plans and services that met children's needs. In the good assessments the approach was evident. It was also improving management oversight of child protection. Ofsted noted the model was being used in children's centres, where family support workers receive case support from members of the Early Help Team who use the model, as well as in the Brent Family Front Door, and at case conferences. However, it said Signs of Safety was not being used uniformly nor fully embedded in all practice.<sup>24</sup>

## **Chapter 3 Findings**

### **Implementation**

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<sup>23</sup> Brent Council Children's Social Care Learning and Development

<sup>24</sup> Ofsted, Inspection of services for children in need of help and protection, children looked after and care leavers, 30 November 2015, pp.10-28

32. Implementation of the project to introduce Signs of Safety under the Innovation Programme started in the Children and Young People's department in early 2015. The scale was ambitious, aiming to train officers who work with children and families from the Family Front Door through to those involved in child protection case conferences. This equates to approximately 280 staff, the majority of whom are social workers and are in the Family Front Door, Early Intervention, Locality teams and Care Planning.

33. The depth of change has been ambitious. The department has set out to shift Signs of Safety from being marginal and used by relatively few members of staff, who may have been trained in 2012 or learned about the model in other local authorities, to making it the central approach to how it works with children, young people and their families.

34. The task group's view is that without being part of the MTM project funded by the Innovation Programme, the local authority would have found it extremely difficult to have funded such a large-scale implementation of Signs of Safety. In October 2016, Brent was invited to be part of the application by MTM for phase three of the Innovation Programme which should enable the department to access more funding for implementing Signs of Safety.<sup>25</sup>

35. To implement Signs of Safety, a project manager was appointed in early 2015. The project manager was a key post, liaising with MTM and facilitating the development of the extensive training programme with staff. The project manager also co-ordinated a Signs of Safety Steering Group, which still functions, attended by the senior leadership team to oversee the implementation. The project manager post was a fixed-term contract which ended in September 2016 because it was paid for from the Innovation Programme.

36. The implementation project has been high-profile. Professor Eileen Munro attended a launch event at Brent Civic Centre in March 2015. In June 2015 there was a staff showcase event at the civic centre, which the Cabinet member for Children and Young People attended and commented favourably on. The internal departmental e-newsletter for staff 'CYP News' has since 2015 carried articles written by staff about their experiences of Signs of Safety, which have been thoughtful and reflective about

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<sup>25</sup> Task group meeting notes 2 November 2016

their experiences. The Signs of Safety project in the department also circulated its own newsletter 'Innovation'.<sup>26</sup>

37. The task group found that policies and procedures have been aligned with Signs of Safety during the implementation. For example, the Common Assessment Framework, now called the Early Help Assessment (EHA), was updated to reflect Signs of Safety. Similarly, forms and the electronic casework system have now been updated to incorporate the tools and assessments used in Signs of Safety. However, this took some time and before that social workers were having to do it manually.<sup>27</sup>

38. As part of the implementation the department has done awareness raising with partner organisations about Signs of Safety. This is important because research highlighted in Chapter 2 suggested that working effectively with partner organisations is an important aspect of implementing Signs of Safety successfully. By August 2015, two half-day sessions with voluntary sector and health agencies attended by 42 delegates had been delivered; there was a presentation to the Brent Local Safeguarding Children's Board by two practice leaders to explain Signs of Safety. In addition, schools and other partners have requested if they can have a briefing about Signs of Safety because their staff have seen it being practised.<sup>28</sup>

39. However, to date there hasn't been an engagement programme with the wider community. The task group is not advocating training; however, engagement could be done with GPs, health professionals, schools and others through existing strategic forums such as Partners for Brent, or the Brent Local Safeguarding Children Board. This would be more appropriate later in the cycle of implementation. The task group has made a recommendation on this.

**40. Recommendation 1: An engagement programme with partners such as schools, GPs and other health professionals is developed to help further raise awareness of Signs of Safety.**

## **Learning**

41. Signs of Safety is a branded product and the training can only be done by those who are properly accredited. The training structure is an introductory two-day course,

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<sup>26</sup> Task group meeting notes 2 November 2016

<sup>27</sup> Task group meeting notes 18 October 2016

<sup>28</sup> Innovation, Issue 2, The August 2015; Task group meeting notes 2 November 2016



and an advanced five-day course. There are no options to change this. The two and five-day sessions are led by a trainer provided by MTM and are the same for all staff.

42. Fundamentally, Signs of Safety was developed as a tool for child protection; however, training is not limited to staff in Localities and has been taken up by those in services such as Education Welfare, Youth Offending Team and the Virtual School. The methodology for Signs of Safety has been adapted across Children and Young People. For example, the Virtual School adapted the practice to Signs of Learning.<sup>29</sup>

43. Quick progress has been made in training staff. By August 2015, the department had delivered two-day introductory training courses to 132 participants. Every new employee, including agency staff, attends the two-day training.

44. Completing the two-day training is just the initial step in becoming a practitioner. Training is intended to be a part of learning; the rest comes from practising Signs of Safety in the field which they are encouraged to do as quickly as possible. After the two-day training there are opportunities to develop at seminars, case supervisions, case mapping in team meetings, staff forums and coaching by practice leaders.<sup>30</sup> There is also an online resource library with training materials, papers by practitioners as well as forms and plans. Marketing materials such as e-flashcards to reinforce what was learned in training have also been produced.

45. Around 115 practice leaders have been trained by completing the five-day training. The five-day sessions were attended by heads of service, senior managers, and the leadership team which is evidence of the commitment to Signs of Safety. Managers who are agency staff also attend.<sup>31</sup> There is a framework to promote continuous learning for practice leaders.<sup>32</sup>

46. Practice leaders are the backbone of the programme in Brent. Their role is to disseminate information, knowledge and to be an exemplar of Signs of Safety in the workplace. The practice leaders also provide consistent leadership, carry out peer reviews and supervisions and strengthen teams' practice and use of tools and techniques. Every team is supposed to have access to a practice leader.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Task group meeting notes 2 November 2016

<sup>30</sup> Innovation, Issue 2 August 2015

<sup>31</sup> Task group meeting notes 2 November 2016

<sup>32</sup> Innovation, Issue 2 August 2015

<sup>33</sup> Innovation, Issue 2 August 2015

47. Brent considered investing in an officer who would then train other staff in-house. This wasn't done because the member of staff would be highly marketable in Signs of Safety and the department would struggle to retain him or her, which has happened at other local authorities who invested in their own in-house trainer. A social worker the task group spoke to felt that the five-day training could be compressed into three days and made more bespoke.<sup>34</sup> However, the task group understands why the in-house training option may not be feasible at present.

48. Generally, the social workers interviewed felt the two-day training was a good grounding, but the five-day training was the most effective in enabling them to work with families in a radically different way. One said: "After the two-day training I came away feeling very positive, feeling it will have a positive impact, but it was not until I had done the five day that I could understand how it is an approach rather than a set of tools."<sup>35</sup>

49. Training is not offered to partner organisations. However, a social worker must work with professionals from different organisations, which in complex cases can be a large number. It was felt by the department's leadership that the professionals in other organisations need to be aware of Signs of Safety, but not trained as they would not be practising it.<sup>36</sup>

50. The task group's view is that the training in Signs of Safety is creating a consistent framework for staff, and a consistency in practice and a language that all understand. However, it's important that the department is able to monitor the effectiveness of training. The task group has made a recommendation in this area.

**51. Recommendation 2: The effectiveness of training in Signs of Safety is monitored by using existing workplace surveys to benchmark effectiveness and highlight any issues which may prevent the proper development of training.**

## **Practice**

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<sup>34</sup> Task group meeting notes 2 November 2016

<sup>35</sup> Task group meeting notes 18 October 2016

<sup>36</sup> Task group meeting notes 2 November 2016

52. As noted, the training is only the first step to becoming a competent practitioner in, and a complete learning journey can take from three to five years.<sup>37</sup> Practitioners have found it a complex tool, and applying the knowledge in the field can be challenging.<sup>38</sup>

53. Practitioners were positive about the tools. One said: “I use scaling questions all the time now. I’ll say to a child ‘I need you to give me a number. It’s the most helpful way of finding out with a family where they are.’” They also found scaling questions useful with partner organisations. One said: “It makes people think clearly. A nurse might say she’s worried. But worried about what? The scaling question pinpoints what is specific to the situation.” However, some agencies can find it difficult to scale concerns about subjects which are not related to them.

54. The task group’s view is that training in Signs of Safety isn’t leading to it being applied too rigidly. For example, one practice leader said: “I’ve found cases where we are not using it. At times the language can be unhelpful. It doesn’t work for every single case. I wouldn’t like to say ‘autism’ is a worry, it wouldn’t be appropriate to do that.”<sup>39</sup>

55. The task group was impressed with the knowledge and understanding of the social workers it met. However, there appears to be an unevenness in how well Signs of Safety is being practised. In January 2016, the Brent Local Safeguarding Children’s Board (LSCB) did a case audit of 29 cases using the Signs of Safety approach and found that in 20 cases there was an inconsistent approach, suggesting a use of pre-existing approaches while using Signs of Safety language.<sup>40</sup>

56. A social worker felt it was being used inconsistently by teams and there were pockets of good practice, which in part was to do with staff turnover and confidence. The Strategic Director said that: “There are examples of good practice but it is fair to say we are not consistently good across the department as yet.”<sup>41</sup> It should be remembered that Brent only started the recent implementation for Signs of Safety in early 2015, and that becoming a complete practitioner takes time.

57. Following a management restructure in April 2016, the department in September 2016 recruited a Principal Social Worker, previously the role was held by a head of

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<sup>37</sup> Amanda Bunn, Signs of Safety in England, (NSPCC, 2013) p116

<sup>38</sup> Task group meeting notes 18 October 2016

<sup>39</sup> Task group meeting notes 18 October 2016

<sup>40</sup> Brent LSCB 2015/16 Annual Report p20

<sup>41</sup> Task group meeting notes 18 October 2016; Task group meeting notes 2 November 2016

service as an additional responsibility. This is the first time the department has had that dedicated role and it will be key in the development of Signs of Safety. In the other local authorities who are part of the 10, they have had a social worker dedicated to developing practice in Signs of Safety.<sup>42</sup>

58. Brent is now part of a national and international network of practitioners. Signs of Safety is an evolving practice and is informed by wider thinking and experience. It's therefore important that the department can share and exchange best practice and experience. A team visited Suffolk County Council and Wokingham Council children's services on a knowledge exchange visit. In July 2016, a group of practitioners from Brent took part in the International Signs of Safety Conference held in Norwich.

59. There are external factors which may affect practising of Signs of Safety. The Strategic Director was open that there are high levels of agency staff although they have been reduced. However, there is also the environment in which social workers must practise Signs of Safety. The Strategic Director expressed a view, which is supported by Professor Eileen Munro, that hot-desking offices can hinder effective working relationships between social workers, which are at the heart of Signs of Safety. Also, there have been problems with the physical environment of one office outside the civic centre. The task group notes these concerns.<sup>43</sup>

60. The task group's view is that a commitment by the department's leadership is important for the implementation and development of the Signs of Safety as a practice. However, it's also important that members play their part. Therefore, the task group recommends that scrutiny has a role to play in the future to monitor the situation for social workers in Brent and the implementation of Signs of Safety.

**61. Recommendation 3: The Cabinet Member for Children and Young People updates scrutiny annually about progress in implementing Signs of Safety, including social worker retention and other factors which may affect development of the practice.**

## **Children and Families**

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<sup>42</sup> Task Group meeting notes 2 November 2016

<sup>43</sup> [www.communitycare.co.uk/2016/04/29/munro-hotdesking-harming-social-work/](http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2016/04/29/munro-hotdesking-harming-social-work/)

62. To understand how Signs of Safety works in practice with children and families members of the task group were introduced to a live case of Child D and Child E by social workers and managers. All the information about the children and adults was anonymised so they could not be identified by any of the members.

63. Task group members were shown how the case mapping works in practice. Officers discussed how they devised a genogram – a graphic representation of a family tree – to plot the relationships between the different members of the family, including the two children and the mother and father, and the wider family members to better understand the family around the children and their wider social network.

64. Officers also demonstrated appreciative inquiry using a technique with the acronym EARS: elicit, amplify, reflect, start over, which enables them to engage sympathetically with a family. This demonstrated to the members how they would engage with a family in a particular case.

65. Officers showed how they would approach the case, by using the Three Columns. They also discussed different danger statements and safety goals for the children which had been written at a case conference by the social workers together with the mother. For example, one danger statement was about the behaviour of Child D at home and in their nursery and the safety goals discussed a plan to help overcome this problem.<sup>44</sup>

66. Task group members noted that the danger statements had been written in plain English and were easy to understand. They were also specific with no ambiguity. The strength of them was that they had been written and agreed together with the mother so they had a strong sense that it wasn't social workers saying to the mother what she needed to do, but that there was an understanding between them and the mother of Child D and Child E. Task group members could see the strength of working in partnership with them, and that a family would find case conference less daunting using this approach because it is collaborative and the working is done together with them.

67. From looking at this case, task group members felt Signs of Safety clearly provides a clear framework for social workers to navigate complex cases and is the right

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<sup>44</sup> Task Group meeting notes 26 October 2016

approach for Brent. The task group also felt that the strengths-based approach of Signs of Safety was an effective way to work with families and as a model for child protection. As noted, Brent has a high proportion of residents who have English as a second language. Social workers reported that the model helps working with those who have English as a second language because of the discipline of using specific and simple language in writing safety goals or danger statements together with the family.<sup>45</sup>

68. Social workers who the task group spoke to were positive about the approach in working with families because of the partnership approach. They reported that families appreciate having an input into keeping a child safe and it gives them a sense of ownership. Previously, the families sometimes felt they were coming in to be criticised, but now when they work on strengths, they feel much more supported and understood.

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69. The Signs of Safety tools such as Three Houses are mainly aimed at younger children. However the social workers found that 13 and 14 year olds find scaling questions useful. One adapted Signs of Safety for older children using the example of a football team and asking 'who do you want playing in your team and in what position?'

70. Task group members felt that the Signs of Safety tools would also make it easier for a child's perspective to be understood and heard as part of the assessment process.

71. Social workers reported a difference in how receptive families are to the Signs of Safety approach. Some have really bought into it while others will go along with it more because the social worker has asked them to. However, it still makes that relationship in working with the more reluctant families easier. They were also clear that Signs of Safety doesn't take away risk if safety is not there in a family.

## Evaluation

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<sup>45</sup> Task group interviews 18 October 2016

<sup>46</sup> Task group interviews 18 October 2016

72. A key question for the task group was to understand how the department knows or can measure if Signs of Safety is working i.e what are the 'meaningful metrics'? Social workers reported that it improves job satisfaction and they were clearly positive about using it. As noted, Brent already has a high percentage of agency staff. In the long-term it may be possible to see that Signs of Safety is one of the factors which is helping to increase the number of permanent social workers.

73. The Strategic Director said that Signs of Safety should enable greater maintenance of children in their families and life chances are improved for most children if they can stay within a family and prevented from coming into care. However, it needs to be recognised that for those at most serious risk of harm care is a life chance.

74. The Strategic Director's view was that as a result of Signs of Safety we should see fewer children in care. If the borough had a stable population of under 18s we would be able to establish if there was a correlation between having fewer children in care and Signs of Safety. However, we have an increasing population in that age group as noted in Chapter 2. Furthermore, there is also a rising number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, which is now one of the largest in London.

75. As the department has only recently started to implement Signs of Safety it may be too early at present to evaluate Signs of Safety. However, it's not too early to start thinking about measuring its effectiveness in the long-term and developing 'meaningful metrics' which could include social worker retention, numbers assessed for Early Help, and numbers of children in care. As Brent is part of a national network this is also something it can work on with other local authorities. The task group has made two recommendations in this area.

**76. Recommendation 4(a): Measurements are developed for assessing how effective Signs of Safety has been in the long-term in improving outcomes for children and young people.**

**77. Recommendation 4(b): Brent works with other local authorities who use Signs of Safety to share information about developing measurements for assessing the effectiveness of the model.**

## **APPENDICES**

### **1. Participants**

The task group would like to thank the following members of staff who contributed to the report, took part in the themed discussion or advised it on policy:

Nigel Chapman, Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes

Brian Grady, Operational Director, Safeguarding, Performance and Strategy

Gail Tolley, Strategic Director, Children and Young People

Councillor Wilhelmina Mitchell Murray, Cabinet Member, Children and Young People

And other members of staff in Brent Council's Children and Young People's department.

### **2. Terms of reference**

The terms of reference for the task group will be to:

1. Review and comment on specific challenges to the effective implementation of Signs of Safety.
2. Compare implementation in Brent with implementation in the nine other local authorities which are part of the England Innovations Project.
3. Reflect on the experiences of front-line social workers, families and children in working with Signs of Safety.
4. Highlight areas of good practice and any issues of concern.
5. Examine the budgetary implications for successful implementation of Signs of Safety.
6. Evaluate realistically the depth as well as the scale of implementing Signs of Safety.
7. Assess the extent to which the model is being implemented in terms alignment of policies and procedures, quality assurance, workforce training, and research.
8. Evaluate the commitment of the officer and political leadership to Signs of Safety.



