



Children's Safeguarding and Social Work

Ways of writing: practice guidance for social workers

Purpose of this guidance

Recording social work activity is a key task for social workers but one that can often feel burdensome. Social work records are required to meet many objectives and besides the social worker, a range of people, from family members to professionals, will contribute information.

It is the social work task to make sense of this input to produce a concise, objective and accurate record that meets all statutory and service requirements and that will provide children with an account of that particular time in their life in the event that they access their records.

This document has been developed to help social workers to produce a clear, balanced account of work carried out with families in a way that reflects Camden's model of social work practice. It provides guidance on practical issues such as punctuation and the use of appropriate language, and also the use of alternative recording methods.

What is case recording for?

- as a record of accountability, providing service users with an account of decision making and the evidence base for these decisions
- to tell the child's story so they can understand what happened and why CSSW intervened in their lives
- to be the child's voice, recording their views, wishes and feelings
- to provide details of what work was carried out with families and its outcome
- to demonstrate how the local authority is meeting legal and statutory duties and responsibilities towards children and families
- to support social workers to analyse information and inform decision-making and planning, for example where the threshold for escalation or step down has been reached
- to facilitate information sharing with other agencies and to provide a clear narrative of the case for others when the allocated worker is not available
- to provide managers with performance information to help plan for services, agree resources and quality assure the work of the division, for example ensuring information is available for the purposes of audits
- good written records are an essential tool for supervisors to monitor the work of their staff and assist them in giving appropriate advice, support and direction
- good written records can also help practitioners to evaluate the work they have done, monitor progress and plan future work in partnership with service users.

Who we write for

Social work records can have a number of purposes and objectives and may need to be written for a diverse audience. Social workers need to consider how these differing perspectives can be met when recording as this can affect the manner in which information is perceived and understood.

- For children, young people and their families the social work record is their “story” of why and how CSSW intervened in their lives and the outcome of this.
- For other professionals in the family’s network, it is evidence of multi-agency working practice, noting the contribution of other agencies in sharing information and delivering services and the effectiveness of joint working.
- For the courts and Legal Services, good recording provides evidence that legal thresholds have been reached during care and other proceedings which in turn informs judicial judgements.
- For managers it provides information on performance indicators and the quality of individual practice and service delivery.
- For regulators such as Ofsted, records are the main source of information on which judgements are based with regard to how well CSSW is meeting legal requirements, demonstrating a high standard of practice and providing evidence of making a positive difference to children’s lives.

Most importantly, social work records provide context and information for children – it tells the child’s story, providing a narrative which can help the child make sense of their experiences when they come to access their records later in life. Records should provide insights into the reasons for CSSW involvement and the rationale for decision making whilst reflecting the child’s voice and their family’s voice. For some children, this record may be the only available information of their history available to them.

Involving children

Social workers should explore different ways of co-producing records with children to ensure that their voice is heard. A variety of recording methods can be used to help children engage with the process and ensure their views are known as well as helping them understand what is happening to them. This can ensure that records are personalised for the child and make it easier for them to understand when they come to read the record at a later date.

Examples are:

- using art (drawings, paintings, making models) as a way of encouraging children to open up about their experiences and feelings
- writing personal letters to the child to explain things that have happened or when certain decisions are made, for example as a record of a visit or LAC review; this can help a child to feel they have been heard and to make sense of a situation
- using consultation forms with use of open questions to encourage children to expand on their experience which can help them to represent themselves in meetings so they can get their views across
- age-appropriate videos can help children understand complex situations use of direct work tools such as the 3 Houses, All About Me and many others are helpful in encouraging children to express their views in a manageable format. <https://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/page/2/>
- **Our recording should be:**

- **Accurate and analytical**
- **Balanced and objective**
- **Concise but comprehensive**
- **Describe the child's lived experience**
- **Easy to read using plain English and avoiding jargon**
- **Focused on the child.**

Records should be succinct, recording only what is necessary and purposeful to describe the work carried out and progress made towards any set goals and objectives. It is important that chronologies are used as a road map for families to see what progress has been made and to spot any patterns.

Records should capture the multiple voices involved in the child's life, including family members, extended family and other professionals working with the child and family.

Records should include any differing points of view, for example from family and professionals, but should make clear what is fact, opinion and professional judgement. Acknowledging in records where there are disagreements can help families to feel that they were listened to.

The language used in recording can be important:

- Language can inform, reflect and influence how we perceive things.
- It can be used to convey judgements and emotions or to deliberately reduce or neutralise judgemental or emotive contexts.

- It can have a huge impact on families and may influence the way they interact and/or engage with social workers.
- It can also influence the perceptions of other professionals working with the family and affect professional judgements on thresholds and interventions.

For example, social workers should be aware of the following:

- Use of professional jargon can act as a barrier to engagement with children. It can prevent others from fully understanding records and reports and can also disempower service users. This can negatively affect a person's ability to participate in discussions or to challenge assumptions.
- Social care can tend towards the use of stock phrases and entrenched language that can be misinterpreted. This can lend bias to interpretations (positive or negative) and may not reflect the reality of the case.
- For example, the term "**non-engaging**" can convey the sense of someone who is deliberately seeking to avoid contact with services. Non-engagement may be better understood as an equality issue where barriers to engagement have not been recognised and addressed and the use of generic terms like non-engagement should be avoided.
- Similarly the term "**challenging**" can have a general application but is subjective and can convey judgement. Describing more clearly the specific behaviour can help social workers to understand the underlying reasons for this behaviour rather than dismissing it as challenging.
- Other phrases such as children "**putting themselves at risk**" can imply that children are complicit in situations which are often exploitative. The use of such a phrase can fail to consider their lack of consent or control over their situation.

When writing up records, practitioners need to reflect on the following:

- **Do we:**
 - use language or terminology that is judgemental or emotionally charged?
 - consider the impact of what we write and the words we use?
 - just record basic facts with no context or explanation?
 - record opinion rather than professional judgement?
 - label people negatively as a means of blaming, for example using terms like "challenging"?
 - label people as non-engaging without considering the barriers they face?
 - use jargon that can disempower or exclude?

- use terms such as empowerment or participation as a gesture rather than when they accurately reflect practice?
- consider whether our language is easily accessible to all service users, including those whose first language is not English?
- record too much?

Words and phrases to avoid

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| <p>The child is putting themselves at risk.</p> | <p>This implies that the child is responsible for their behaviour and ignores the potential influence of exploiters and the child's lack of informed consent.</p> <p>Social workers should be considering whether the child is being groomed and/or exploited or that the child may be acting under duress.</p> |
| <p>The child would not co-operate/engage...</p> | <p>Social workers need to consider context when children and families feel unable to work with CSSW and be specific in the language used. A child may feel vulnerable and unable to work with CSSW due to fear of repercussion. Often young people feel powerless in such situations and feel they have no choice but to remain passive.</p> |
| <p>Missing...</p> | <p>In cases where children are missing, social workers should explore the context of this, for example do they feel unsafe or unable to stay in their current location, is the child being groomed to leave the current location? What are the circumstances of the child being missing?</p> |
| <p>Sexually active, in a relationship with, exchanging sex for drugs/alcohol</p> | <p>This implies the young person has consented to sexual activity but this must be considered in the context of a potentially abusive or exploitative relationship. Social workers should be aware of the provisions of the Sexual Offences Act 2003 in relation to consent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16/17 year olds can consent to sexual activity but this may be rebutted if there is evidence of an exploitative relationship or the adult is a person in a position of trust. • Under 16s cannot consent to sexual activity |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Any sexual activity with a child under 13 is a crime |
| Drug running/recruiting | This implies that the child is making an active choice to carry out criminal activities and overlooks the exploitative nature of the child's situation |
| Involved in child exploitation | This implies a choice on the part of the child rather than conveying the exploitative nature of the relationship and lack of consent. |

When writing:

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| Plain English | Always use plain English when writing in order to achieve clarity and accessibility. For guidance see the Plain English guide: Free guides (plainenglish.co.uk) |
| Spelling | Use the spellcheck function to make sure of accurate spelling. Be aware of words with different spellings and meanings, for example their/there |
| Grammar and punctuation | For help with grammar and punctuation, these websites offer free checks Grammarly Free Grammar Checker Grammarly Wordtune Wordtune Your personal writing assistant & editor Quilbot Free Grammar Checker - QuillBot AI Grammar Grammar.com Longman's grammar resource Free Download Longman English Grammar Practice With Key (Grammar Reference) by L. G. Alexander (eltslibrary.com) |
| Abbreviations | Unless an abbreviation is well-known (for example GP, MP) it should be written in full in the first instance with the abbreviation in brackets) then the abbreviation used following on from then. For example: The Department of Works and Pensions (DWP) wrote to Mrs Smith.... |

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| | Mrs Smith wrote back to the DWP.... |
| Capital letters | <p>Capital letters should only be used:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the start of a sentence • For proper nouns such as someone’s name or the name of a place (John Smith, Southend) • Languages or nationalities (English, Iranian) • Service/team names (Family Court, Early Help Service) • Court orders (Care Order, Placement Order) |
| Contractions | <p>Avoid use of contractions and write in full where possible, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • it’s – it is • can’t – cannot • hasn’t – has not • we’re – we are • eg/ie; - for example |
| Names | <p>People should be referred to by their full name initially with an explanation as to their relationship to the child, for example Ms Ann Jones, the mother. After that they may be referred to by their first name unless this may cause confusion with the identity of another person in the network with the same name. In these cases further information in brackets should be used to identify the person who is being referred to. For example Ms Ann Jones (grandmother). People should not be referred to solely by their relationship to the child (for example the mother, the step-father).</p> |
| Recording the voice of the child and family | <p>When writing what was said by children or family members, try to use the exact words and indicate this by using quotation marks, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polly said she “never wanted to come to this place and wanted to go home now”. • Mrs Smith admitted that she “was in a bad place” at the time of the incident. |

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| Personal pronouns | Always check with service users how they would like to be addressed in terms of their preferred personal pronouns (he/she/they) and use this when referring to them. Using the correct pronouns he/she/they when addressing clients demonstrates respect and acknowledgement of individual circumstances. Where it is not clear, try to use unisex pronouns such as they instead. |
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