



## **Children's Safeguarding and Family Help**

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 practice 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 the family 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 explores alternative recording methods.

## **What is case recording for?**

- as a record of accountability, providing service users with an account of decision making and evidence for these decisions
- to tell the child's story so they can understand what happened and why CSFH 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 division is meeting its legal duties towards children and families
- to help social workers analyse information and inform decisions and planning, for example where the threshold for escalation or step down has been reached
- to facilitate information sharing with other agencies and providing a source of information 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 via audits
- records are a tool for supervisors to monitor the work of their staff and assist them in giving appropriate advice, support and direction
- records can be used as a tool by practitioners to evaluate the work they have done, monitor progress and plan future work with and on behalf of the service user.

## Who we write for

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

- For children, young people and their families the social work record is their “story” of why and how CSFH intervened in their lives and the outcome of this.
- For other professionals it is a record of multi-agency working and notes the contribution of other agencies in sharing information and delivering services.
- For the courts, it is evidence that legal thresholds have been reached during care and other proceedings in order to inform judicial judgements.
- For managers it provides information on performance indicators and the quality of practice and service delivery.
- For regulators such as Ofsted it is a source of information on which judgements on CSFH performance during inspections is based and evidence that CSFH is meeting their legal duties to children and families.

Most importantly, social work records tell the child’s story and needs to provide an explanation for CSFH intervention in their lives and the reasons for decisions that were taken as well as reflecting the child’s voice. For some children, this record may be the only available information of their history that they have.

## Involving children

Social workers should explore different ways of co-producing records with the child to ensure that their voice is heard. A variety of recording methods can be used to help children get involved 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 drawings by the child to convey views
- writing personal letters to the child to explain things that have happened or decisions made, for example as a record of a visit or LAC review
- using consultation forms to help children get their views across ahead of review meetings
- use of direct work tools such as the 3 Houses to help children explore difficult feelings.

**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; it can prevent others from fully understanding records and reports and can disempower service users. This can negatively affect a person's ability to participate in discussions or to challenge assumptions.

## Ways of writing guidance

- Social care can tend towards the use of stock phrases and entrenched language that although widely accepted, may not reflect the reality of the case and may imply a more a positive or negative interpretation that is in fact the case.
- For example, the term “non-engaging” can convey the sense of someone who is deliberately seeking to avoid contact with services; the non-engagement may be better understood as an equality issue where barriers to engagement have not been recognised and addressed.
- Language can convey a judgement and put a label on an individual. For example the term “challenging” has negative connotations but does not describe the actual behaviour observed. Describing the actual behaviour is more objective and can help social workers to explore and understand the reasons for this behaviour.
- Using certain words or phrases when working with children who are being exploited (for example “putting themselves at risk”) can give the impression that they are complicit in their exploitation and fails to convey 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**

<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. 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..</p>	<p>The child may not have felt safe enough to disclose or that they feel powerless to take any steps to exit the exploitation.</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"> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• Under 16s cannot consent to sexual activity</li> <li>• Any sexual activity with a child under 13 is a crime</li> </ul>
<p>Drug running/recruiting</p>	<p>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</p>
<p>Involved in child exploitation</p>	<p>This implies a choice on the part of the child rather than conveying the exploitative nature of the relationship and lack of consent.</p>

**When writing:**

Plain English	Always use plain English when writing in order to achieve clarity and accessibility. For guidance see the Plain English guide: <a href="https://www.plainenglish.co.uk">Free guides (plainenglish.co.uk)</a>
Spelling	Use the spellcheck function to make sure of accurate spelling
Grammar and punctuation	For help with grammar and punctuation, these websites offer free checks  Grammarly <a href="#">Free Grammar Checker   Grammarly</a> Wordtune <a href="#">Wordtune   Your personal writing assistant &amp; editor</a> Quilbot <a href="#">Free Grammar Checker - QuillBot AI</a> Grammar <a href="#">Grammar.com</a> Longman’s grammar resource <a href="#">Free Download Longman English Grammar Practice With Key (Grammar Reference) by L. G. Alexander (ieltslibrary.com)</a>
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....  Mrs Smith wrote back to the DWP....
Capital letters	Capital letters should only be used:  <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• At the start of a sentence</li> <li>• For proper nouns such as someone’s name or the name of a place (John Smith, Southend)</li> <li>• Languages or nationalities (English, Iranian)</li> <li>• Service/team names (Family Court, Early Help Service)</li> <li>• Court orders (Care Order, Placement Order)</li> </ul>

<p>Contractions</p>	<p>Avoid use of contractions and write in full where possible, for example:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• it’s – it is</li> <li>• can’t – cannot</li> <li>• hasn’t – has not</li> <li>• we’re – we are</li> <li>• eg/ie; - for example</li> </ul>
<p>Names</p>	<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, for example if there are 2 people called Ann in the family. In these cases it should be clearly indicated who they are, 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>
<p>Recording the voice of the child and family</p>	<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"> <li>• Polly said she “never wanted to come to this place and wanted to go home now”.</li> <li>• Mrs Smith admitted that she “was in a bad place” at the time of the incident.</li> </ul>
<p>Personal pronouns</p>	<p>Always check with people regarding their preferred personal pronoun (he/she/they) and use this when referring to them. Where it is not clear, try to use unisex pronouns such as they instead.</p>