



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

Working with non-engaging, resistant  
and hostile families practice guidance

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## Introduction and purpose of policy

- Non-engagement is where social workers are unable to progress work due to lack of access to a family and the child, or where the level or quality of contact with a family is so limited that it compromises assessments and social work judgements or makes on-going work impossible. This can make it hard for social workers to carry out their statutory duty to safeguard and promote the child.
- It is essential that all forms of non-engagement and hostility are reported to managers and actions taken under this policy so that Camden can continue to keep the child in focus at all times and therefore safeguard their welfare, as well as keeping workers safe.

**Non-engagement may have serious implications for the child's safety and welfare and must never be ignored.**

- The policy aims to help social workers and their supervisors and managers to:
  - identify types of non-engagement
  - understand families' responses to CSFH involvement
  - develop strategies for dealing with the differing types of non-engagement
  - assess the potential risk to children of non-engagement of parents and carers.

## 2 Recognising non-engagement

There are a wide range of reasons why families do not engage with social workers, and this is characterised by a variety of ways in which such non-engagement is shown. These are:

- **Ambivalence**, consistently late for appointments or cancelling appointments; changing the subject during discussion to avoid dealing with issues.
- **Avoidance**, avoiding or failing to turn up to appointments; being unavailable for planned visits or cutting visits short.
- **Non-compliance**; actively sabotaging implementation of the plan either through actions or omissions.

- **Disguised compliance**; giving an outward appearance of compliance whilst subverting the implementation of the plan.
- **Confrontation**; challenging professionals, disputing facts.
- **Hostility**; threats or actual acts of violence against workers, including behaviour designed to intimidate.

### 3 Characteristics of non-engaging families

- Families who are failing to engage may avoid contact with social workers, or the quality of contact may be poor and characterised by resistance, an unwillingness to provide information, and a general hostility and mistrust.
- Non-engaging families can also be characterised by those where (despite a long period of involvement with CSFH and other agencies) there has been little or no improvement to the situation and a lack of progress, resulting in the case “drifting”.
- Parents who are actively avoiding contact with social workers may miss appointments, deny access to the family home, or prevent social workers from seeing the child alone.
- Some parents may appear to engage with CSFH on the surface, but their engagement is in reality a form of **resistance**. This may take the form of:
  - reluctance to share information
  - aggressive or hostile behaviour
  - minimising issues
  - failing to take up services offered
  - focusing on low priorities to the exclusion of more important issues.
- Social workers should be mindful of the following behaviours which may indicate non-engagement at varying levels:
  - failure to take advice, attend meetings or take up services
  - minimising concerns or diverting attention away from the child’s needs to their own by controlling discussions
  - manipulating the professional network by aligning themselves with one professional or targeting a professional for criticism

- denying or disrupting contact with the child or family through hostile or threatening behaviour
- using the complaints system to change or control social worker's responses
- no significant progress at review with key tasks uncompleted and "drift" within the case
- any change has been brought about by external pressure from agencies
- change is sporadic, short-lived, or limited to one area of concern.

#### 4. Understanding why families do not engage

- Understanding the reasons why families are not engaging with services is a key element to developing successful strategies for encouraging their participation or deciding on interventions where non-engagement is a serious risk to the child's safety and welfare.
- Parental reactions to intervention by CSFH may vary from fear or mistrust to a general hostility towards authority based on previous poor contacts with agencies. For some families, this may be based on experiences of discrimination. Involvement with CSFH is also bound to cause some stress to families particularly as involvement may be obligatory rather than through choice.
- Hostility to contact with agencies may also be based on a fear of loss of control of the home environment, and this may be particularly prevalent in cases where domestic abuse is an issue. Parents may wish to maintain privacy and will resent outside interference, especially given the stigma of social work involvement with the family.
- Parents with attributes that may affect their parenting capacity, such as those suffering mental illness or coping with substance misuse, may be resistant to accepting they have a problem, or that it compromises their ability to care for their child. These attributes may also affect parents' ability to actively deal with issues or carry out their role in implementing the child's plan.
- Lack of co-operation could be due to parents not understanding the reasons for CSFH concerns or the role of the social worker, or what they are expected to do in order to change the situation. Families from abroad may not have any knowledge of the English child protection or legal system.

- The main reason for non-engagement will be a fear that their children will be removed from their care, and this may well be the case for some mothers who have already experienced this. Parents will also be fearful of being “judged” as bad parents by the professional network.
- One fear that families may have is that information provided to social workers may be passed to other agencies with whom the family may have good reason to avoid contact, for example families who are concerned about their residence status in the UK.
- There are a range of cultural, social and psychological reasons for parental non-engagement, and social workers need to be able to recognise them in order to address the family’s fears. **However, social workers also need to be able to distinguish when families are actively trying to cover up harm and abuse, or hostile and threatening behaviour is being deliberately used to keep social workers away.**

## 5. Impact of non-engagement

- Non-engagement can seriously interfere with the process of assessment and information gathering as it makes it more difficult for social workers to gain information from the family or observe the family, including seeing the child alone and ascertaining their wishes and feelings. This in turn will affect the quality of assessments.
- Non-engagement will also disrupt the formation of a good working partnership between the social worker and the family.
- Reduced opportunities to meet with the family will make it difficult for social workers to put together any coherent picture of the child’s life or form any hypothesis as to what is going on in the family. Lack of information will also affect social work judgements on levels of risk.
- The impact on the child of non-engagement and parental hostility to social workers should always be considered and a risk assessment carried out. Social workers should consider any evidence that suggests the child:
  - is too frightened to speak out
  - believes their situation is normal
  - identifies with the parent’s behaviour
  - has developed appeasement strategies to avoid conflict with parents.

## 6 Developing strategies for engagement

### 6.1 Multi-agency responses

- Where families are not engaging with services, there needs to be a coherent multi-agency strategy in place that helps reduce the barriers to a family engaging with services.
- It is crucial that social workers involve the professional network so that information can be shared on any new risks, the family's patterns of engagement across agencies and any strategies currently being used by agencies successfully to ensure engagement. This will help professionals identify difficulties and plan integrated strategies to deal with non-engagement.

Social workers should refer to the CSCP multi-agency guidance for further details.

[CSCP-multi-agency-guidance-on-working-with-non-engaging-families-2019.pdf](#)

### 6.2 Proportionate responses

- Strategies need to strike a balance between safeguarding the child and building a good working relationship with the family that emphasises partnership working to achieve good outcomes. However, it is important that the strategy used is proportionate to the level of concern for the child.
- Strategies may range from encouraging and empowering families to participate, to taking specific legal action to achieve compliance.
- Voluntary, persuasive strategies may be useful when dealing with families who are resistant to change but have good contact with CSFH and where there are no serious concerns about the child's safety or welfare.
- If the family are actively avoiding contact with CSFH and there are high levels of concern, more rigorous intervention may be required.
- It is a matter of professional judgement as to what level of intervention is most appropriate based on the level of risk to the child and social workers should make this decision on a case by case basis.

### 6.3 Working with families who are non-engaging

- Social workers should be clear with families about their role and the legal basis of their authority and should consider using written agreements to help families understand what the concerns for the child are, their role in making necessary changes and what action CSFH will take if non-engagement leads to these changes not being made in a timely manner.
- Building a good working relationship with families based on honesty, respect, openness and trust is essential to secure co-operation. Social workers should provide emotional support as well as practical help and should try to gain an understanding of why families do not engage with services.
- Social workers should try to anticipate problems and make arrangements to facilitate parents' participation such as using interpreters and being aware of issues such as low literacy levels or learning difficulties that may act as a barrier to parental involvement.
- In cases where domestic abuse may be a factor, victims may have good reason to avoid contact with CSFH, and social workers may need to develop strategies for contacting the victim without the perpetrator's knowledge. Social workers should refer to the division's domestic abuse policy for more details on this. [cssw-domestic-abuse-policy.pdf](#)

### 6.4 Engaging children and young people

Camden expects social workers to adopt a child-centred practice that enables them to build up good relationships with children, to listen to them and help them to explore their feelings about their situation and what they would like to see change.

The following are standards of practice that can help engage children and young people:

- building up a trusting relationship with the child and being honest and open
- seeing children alone, including making separate time for siblings
- involving them in decision-making where possible and ensuring that their views are actively sought
- keeping them informed of actions to be taken, and providing an explanation for decisions
- explaining why sometimes their wishes cannot be carried out by CSFH



- using appropriate resources to aid communication, including consultation forms
- arranging direct work to be held at times and locations that are convenient for the child and that facilitate communication
- making sure children can overcome any barriers to communication such as disability
- working at the child's pace
- supporting the child to deal with their emotions.

Social workers should refer to the "Direct work with children" practice guidance for further information. [direct-work-with-children.pdf](#)

### **6.5 Strategies to gain access to families**

Where it is difficult to meet up with families, every effort should be made to contact the family by telephone and by letters offering appointments both at home and at the office. If appointments are being missed, initial strategies should include:

- undertaking unannounced visits at a time when it is known that the family is likely to be in. If the family live in council property, estate officers may be able to help with this information;
- visiting with another professional such as a health visitor;
- asking the health visitor to attempt to visit the house or invite the family in to the clinic to ensure the child is seen;
- checking with the child's school or nursery to establish if the child is attending;
- if the family uses other resources in the community such as children's centres, making contact with the organisation to request help in contacting the family;
- leaving a message with the school to ask the family to make contact or arrange an appointment at the school with the parents which a social worker can attend as well;
- attempting to meet with a parent at the school or nursery after they have taken the child there.

## 6.6 Strategies for gaining information for assessment

- Where families are not forthcoming with information for assessment, social workers will need to use as wide a range of information and materials as possible, linking with the professional network to gain any information held by other agencies and using any CSFH case records from previous involvement.
- Members of the extended family may be able to help provide information, but social workers should be aware of any possible limitations to this strategy if the parents are in conflict with their family.
- Any lack of information or “unknown factors” will mean a heightened risk and must be taken into account when assessing risk.

## 7 Dealing with non-engagement

### 7.1 Missed visits and appointments

- Camden’s visits policy sets out the requirement for social workers to meet up with families or visit families at home and the expectations for seeing children alone. This is a vital part of safeguarding and monitoring the implementation of the child’s plan. [home-visits-policy.pdf](#)
- Where a family misses 2 consecutive pre-planned visits, social workers should report this to their supervisor or manager for discussion immediately and an action plan agreed. This is particularly important following on from referral and during assessment where the family are relatively unknown to CSFH and there may not be enough information available to make an informed judgement on risk.
- If the child is subject to a child protection plan or an ongoing child protection investigation the conference Chair or a child protection IRO must be consulted.
- Discussions should consider the following:
  - What is the perceived or known level of need, concern or risk in relation to the child?
  - For new cases, what information about the family is already available?

- Has the child been seen recently by a social worker or another member of the professional network?
- Is there a history of non-engagement with CSFH or other agencies?
- Social workers should refer to the flowchart in Appendix 1 for details of steps to be followed.

## 7.2 Child in need cases

- The supervisor or manager should write to the family offering a new appointment and setting out why CSFH are concerned about the lack of engagement.
- If the family does not respond to the letter within 5 working days or fails to engage with another pre-arranged meeting, and there is no risk of significant harm, the social worker should convene a network meeting to include professionals and the family.
- The meeting should look at the reasons for non-engagement and try to agree a strategy with families to forward work. Families should be made aware of what concerns professionals hold and what action will be taken in the event that non-engagement continues.
- If the family fails to attend the meeting, the professional network should share information in order to assess the level of risk to the child and the possible impact of non-engagement on their safety and welfare. The supervisor or manager should write to the family informing them of what action will be taken if non-engagement continues.
- If non-engagement continues, the social worker and supervisor or manager should consult with a child protection IRO to decide what impact non-engagement may have on the child's safety and welfare and whether risks are increasing as a result of non-engagement.
- If it is thought that the child may be at risk of significant harm, child protection procedures should be followed and a strategy meeting convened.
- If there is no risk to the child due to non-engagement and levels of need are low, the supervisor or manager may wish to consider whether it would be more appropriate to step the case down to the Early Help service.

### 7.3 Child protection cases

In child protection cases, there is a more robust statutory framework for ensuring access to children.

- The manager should write to the family offering a new appointment and setting out why CSFH are concerned about the lack of engagement.
- If the family does not respond to the letter within 2 working days or fails to engage with another pre-arranged meeting, the social worker should contact the professional network to see if the child or family has been seen and gather information to assess the level of risk to the child.
- The social worker should convene a core group meeting with professionals and the family to discuss the concerns around non-engagement and look at strategies to improve the family's engagement. The family should be informed of what action may be taken if non-engagement continues.
- If non-engagement continues following the core group meeting, the conference Chair should be informed. The next scheduled child protection conference should look at the issue of non-engagement and decide whether the case should be referred for a legal planning meeting prior to referral to the Care Pathways panel for escalation to pre-proceedings.
- If at any time (following consultation with the professional network, core group meeting or child protection conference) it is believed that the child is in immediate danger, social workers should consult with their supervisor or manager and the conference Chair to consider whether to take emergency action to protect the child. This may involve contacting the CAIT or consulting with legal services to look at applying for an emergency protection order or interim care order.

### 7.4 Changes to patterns of engagement

- Difficulty in gaining access may be a general feature of working with a particular family. However, a family who had previously engaged well with services may suddenly become hard to engage because of changes in family circumstances.

- In these cases, social workers need to persevere and make every effort to gain access using the strategies listed above and discussing with their supervisor any difficulties encountered in meeting with the family and seeing the child.
- If families stop engaging suddenly, this may be indicative of a major change of circumstance and should be looked into immediately. Social workers should discuss the matter with their manager and follow the steps set out above.
- If the case has not recently been dealt with by the MASH team, and there are high levels of concern coupled with a failure to meet with the family or see the child, the manager may wish to approach the MASH manager with a view to carrying out MASH information checks.
- If there are high levels of concern about the child's safety, and/or the child has not been seen for some time, social workers and their managers should discuss the situation with the child protection IRO, consult with the network, and consider whether an urgent strategy meeting should be convened or whether legal intervention should be made.

## 8 Working with hostile families

### 8.1 Understanding hostility

- Some families may exhibit behaviour that social workers find threatening or intimidating, such as shouting, swearing, throwing things, verbal threats, or actual violence. It is important that hostile behaviour is dealt with as it can have serious consequences for the social worker and could raise questions about the child's safety.
- Hostility, threats and violence are an extreme response to social work involvement but must be understood by social workers in order to address issues and reduce risk.
- Social workers should try to identify the specific triggers for hostility:
  - Families may be unhappy about certain case decisions, or unhappy about the way in which work is being conducted or professional attitudes towards them.

- They may have a genuine grievance and should be advised to go through the complaints system.
- Parents may not be aware of the impact of their behaviour on social workers, with hostility directed towards the council rather than individual workers.
- Involvement with CSFH is bound to cause high levels of stress to families and this may manifest itself in hostile behaviour.
- However, in some cases parents may be well aware of the impact of their behaviour on social workers and employing this behaviour deliberately to hide the true situation, be obstructive or force social workers to back off.

## 8.2 Impact on workers

Social workers need to be aware of the impact of non-engagement, and particularly of hostility and threats, on themselves and their professional behaviour and judgement (see appendix 2). In particular, social workers should be mindful of the following:

:

- becoming overly confrontational and over-challenging, leading to tension within the relationship with the family
- colluding with families to avoid conflict
- becoming over-vigilant to personal threats to the extent that work with the family is compromised, such as listening or observation
- filtering out negative information or minimising its impact on the child in order to avoid challenge
- feeling helpless or paralysed and unsure about what tactics to employ or interventions to take in order to implement the child's plan.

The impact may be more extreme where the worker:

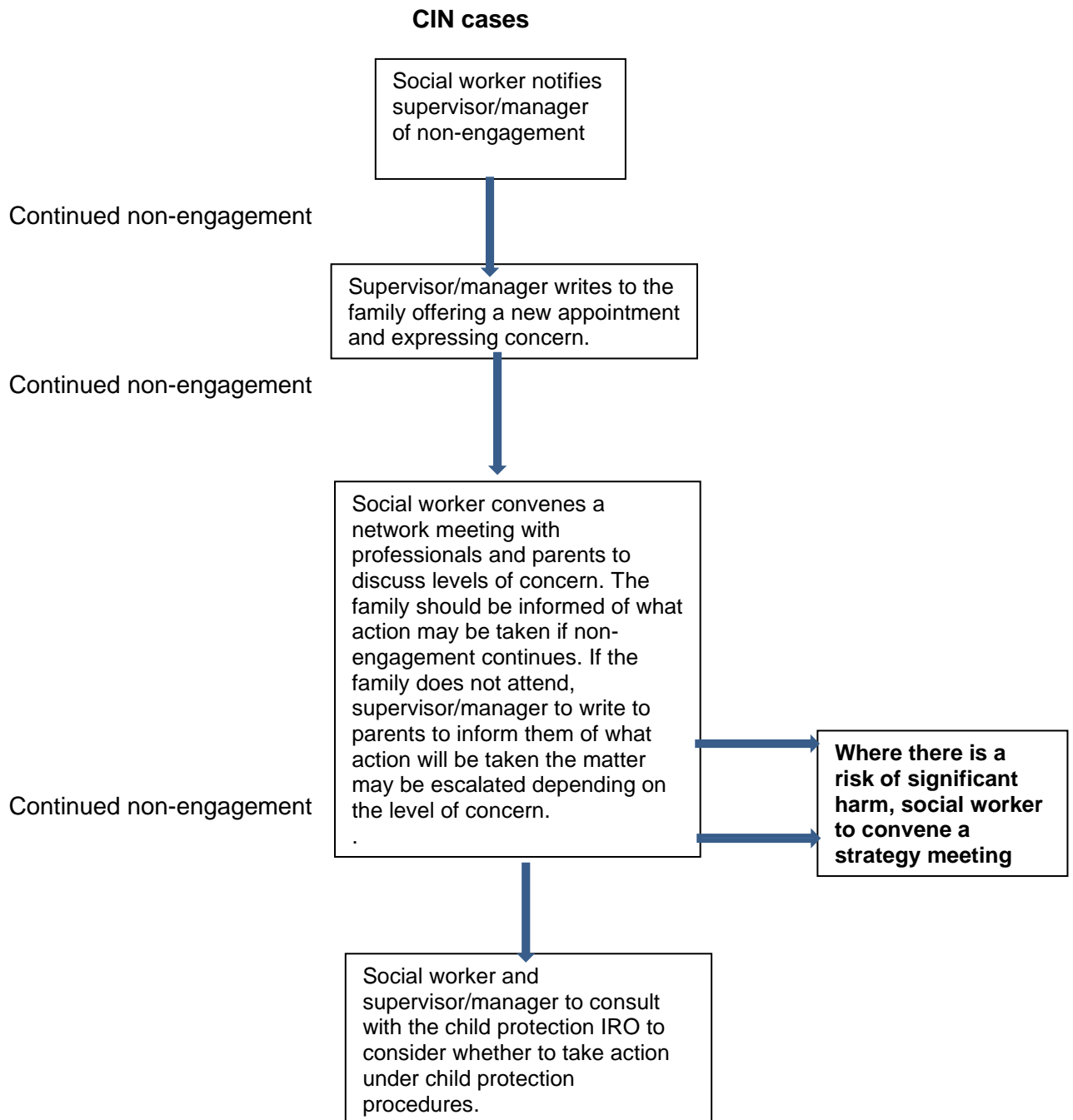
- has experienced previous hostile or violent incidents and has a heightened stress response

- operates in an environment where such incidents are common-place, so that either social workers become desensitised to risks or fail to get a balanced view on the level of risk evidenced
- develops responses to appease or accommodate the service user rather than confront the behaviour
- is experiencing hostility that is linked to personal attributes of theirs, such as their ethnicity or sexual orientation.

### 8.3 Action to protect staff

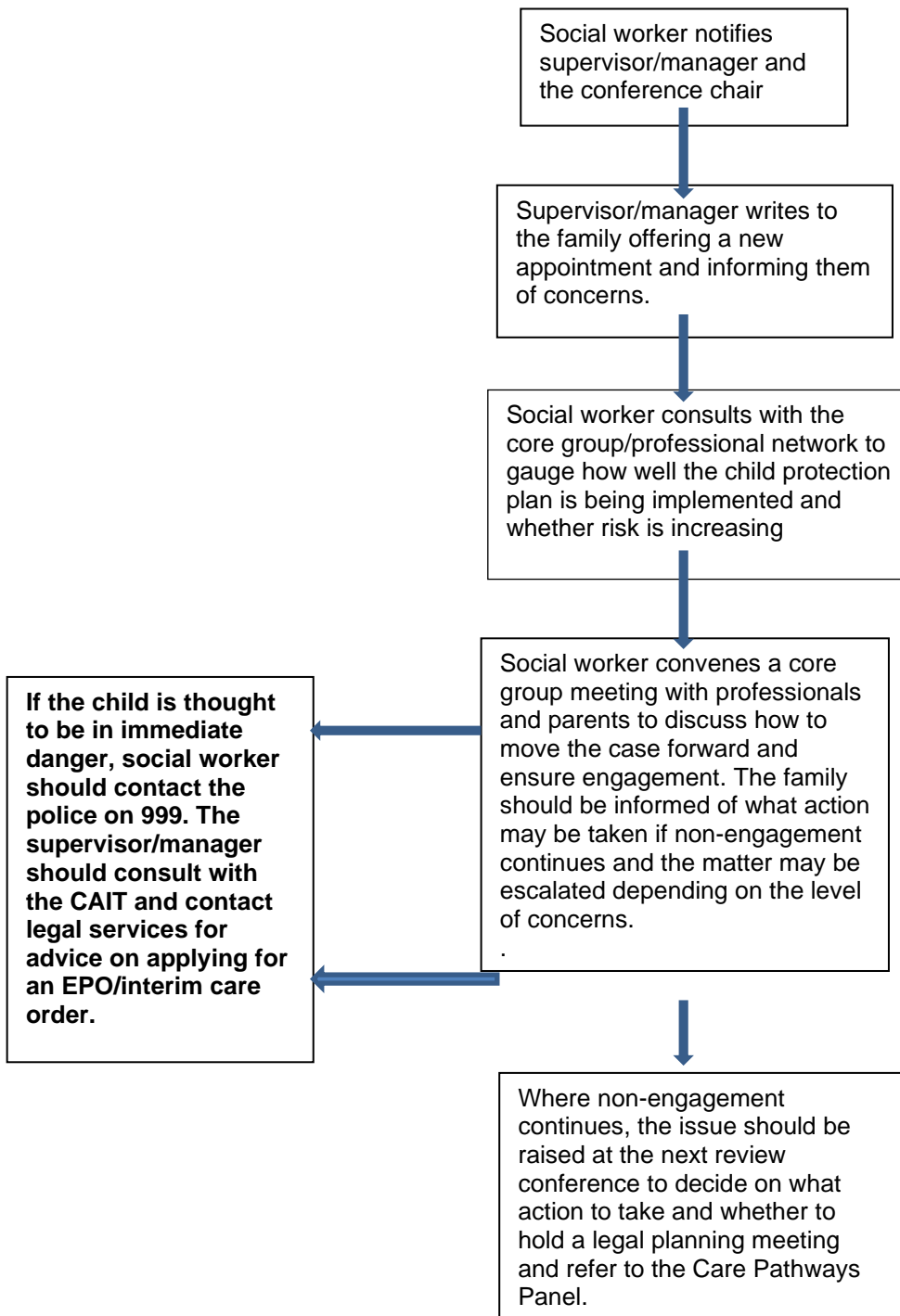
- As an employer, Camden has a duty of care towards its staff and this duty is discharged by managers. Social work managers are responsible for ensuring that social workers have a safe working environment and working practices, with access to relevant training, adequate resources and professional support.
- Social workers and managers who are dealing with hostility from service users should refer to the division's *Staff safety and lone working* policy for details of what action to take to assess risk and work safely with a family who present as hostile and aggressive. [children-and-families-staff-lone-working-and-safety-policy.pdf](#)

### Appendix 1 Non-engagement escalation





**CP cases**



**Appendix 2: Impact of non-engagement and hostility on social workers**

Social workers and their supervisors can use this checklist to assess whether and how a family's non-engagement strategies and the use of hostile behaviour and threats are impacting on their professional behaviour and judgement.

Am I.....?

- accepting excuses for non-engagement too readily without considering the cumulative impact on the child?
- failing to take any action regarding non-engagement because the situation isn't at crisis point?
- colluding with parents in order to avoid conflict by focussing on minor issues?
- avoiding making contact in person through home visits and using remote forms of contact such as telephone calls instead?
- not asking to see the child alone or to look around the house?
- accepting parent's version of events without looking for objective evidence?
- focussing on the parents needs rather than the child's?
- filtering out or minimising negative information, or placing too much emphasis on positive information?
- not sharing concerns with managers or other professionals?
- becoming desensitised to what is going in the family?
- relieved when there is no-one in on a visit, or when a visit ends?
- treating visits to this family the same as for other families, and not changing behaviours?
- failing to challenge parents about concerns?
- seeing all the people in the household or has someone not been identified?