

Social Work Practice Standards

As Social Workers and staff in Children's Social Care and Targeted Services, we all want the best for our children. But how do we know what "best" looks like? The Peer Challenge in October 2019 found that "a lack of practice standards or summary of [what] good practice looks like is hindering quality of practice and consistency of audit".

These practice standards have been written to help you know what you are aiming for, whatever your role in a child's life.

After ensuring children are safe from harm and meeting your statutory requirements, the practice standards describe the minimum service or practice that a child and their family can expect from you as a Social Worker / member of staff in Knowsley. They are a baseline to aim for; and then exceed. They will help you focus your work to achieve the best outcomes for children and will help your manager and any auditors when looking at your work to pass fairer judgement and support you to improve even more.

1. Why do we need Social Work Practice Standards?

- To provide a consistent approach when working with children families
- To ensure there are clear expectations for social workers and managers which they can measure themselves against
- All social workers and managers have clear guidance regarding their roles and responsibilities as professionals

2. Supporting Social Work Practice Standards

To support Knowsley's Social Work Practice Standards, there are:

- Supervision Standards
- Management Standards
- The Children's Social Care tri-x Procedures
- A set of assessment and direct work tools that social workers can use in their practice
- Performance and Quality Assurance Framework

3. Social Work Principles in Knowsley

Our principles in Knowsley are:

- Listening to children and families and giving importance to what they say
- Building on the strengths as well as identifying the difficulties, focusing on building networks that families have in place to support them to identify solutions
- Family and child centred and understood by the family as a whole
- Rooted in child development
- Understanding the family's individuality, values, beliefs, spirituality and recognises difference

- Open and honest communication about why we are involved, what we are worried about and what needs to happen
- The importance of Early Help – doing all we can to support families at the earliest point in order to keep children safe, happy and well
- Identifying the right support and agencies for families and working in a multi-agency forum

4. Knowsley's Social Work Practice Standards

Standard 1 - Assessments

Assessments will be child centered, proportionate and of a high quality

Standard 2 - The child is the focus

I will make sure that the child remains the focus of my work.

Standard 3 – Working in partnership

I will work in partnership with families & other professionals.

Standard 4 – SMART and purposeful plans

I will make sure that every action in each child's plan is SMART and purposeful and will make a difference to the child's life.

Standard 5 – No drift or delay

I will ensure that no child will be subjected to “drift or delay” in terms of the planning, support and permanency.

Standard 6 – Outcomes and impact

I will make sure that I am outcomes focussed. I will make sure that the plan that is in place for each child has a positive impact on their life – and if it doesn't I will change the plan.

Standard 7 – Permanency

I will consider the long term (permanent) plan for each child I am working with from the first time I meet them.

Standard 8 – Children's lives

I will make sure children understand experiences.

Standard 9 – Recording

I will make sure that children's records are up to date, jargon free and show clear decision making.

Standard 10 – The Golden Thread

I will never lose sight of the “Golden Tread” when I am working with a family.

Standard 1 - Assessments

Assessments will be child centered, proportionate and of a high quality

Why?

All of our assessments are about the child. If we get distracted by adult's needs and the impact of circumstances on the adults, the child can easily be lost. It is important that when we discuss adult's issues / circumstances that we look at the impact of these things on the child's life experiences. Assessment need to be holistic to ensure that when we have completed our work, all of the child's needs are met, not just the issue that was referred in. If assessments are of poor quality, plans are likely to be of poor quality and they won't have the desired impact on the child's life.

How?

- I will read the child's history on ICS before meeting with the family.
- I will gain consent from the family to complete the assessment and discuss this with my manager if they do not give consent.
- I will complete the assessment "with" the family. I won't "do to" the family.
- I will use the Assessment Framework to ensure I cover all areas that need to be included in the assessment.
- I will use the Signs of Safety model of practice to ensure the best service for the family.
- I will see the child within 3 working days of allocation; sooner if needed.
- I will send my assessment to my Team Manager for review after 10 working days and complete my assessment on time.
- I will speak to the child alone to gain their wishes & feelings and record this in the assessment.
- I will complete a genogram, including absent parents for each child that I work with. I will include wider family / friends in the assessment as necessary.
- I will respond to needs as they arise, not wait until the end of the assessment to put all support in place.
- I will arrange Support Network Meetings during the assessment to ensure support is in place as soon as possible.
- I will consider equality & diversity issues for every child and the impact of these on the child's life.
- I will gather information from all relevant family members and professionals to ensure I am able to provide the right level of support the child & their family.
- I will use tools such as a hypothesis tree to support my analysis of the information gathered.
- I will use research and theory to support my hypotheses/analysis.
- I will analyse the information carefully, considering the impact of the circumstances on each child in the family.
- I will write the assessment in clear, concise and jargon free language that the family and professionals can understand.
- I will share the assessment with the family once it is complete; printing out the family friendly version.
- I will consider referring the family to Early Help if they do not require intervention from Children's Social Care. If a referral is made I will gain consent from the family to share the assessment with Early Help to ensure they are not re-assessed.

Standard 2 - The child is the focus

I will make sure that the child remains the focus of my work.

Why?

We are often involved with children as a result of an adult's actions (or lack of). This can mean it becomes really easy to make the adult the focus of our work; supporting them to reduce alcohol use, leave an abusive partner, improve home conditions etc. Whilst these things inevitably need doing, we need to remember that if the adult wasn't the carer of the child we are working with –we wouldn't be working with the adult. We are not adult social workers. Everything we do, including work to support the adults around a child is ultimately for the benefit of the child.

How?

- I will work hard to build up a meaningful and stable relationship with each child that I work with. I will let each child know how they can contact me and I will always get back to them if they ask to speak to me.
- I will complete direct work (observation/conversation/worksheet etc.) with each child during every assessment.
- I will complete direct work (observation/conversation/worksheet etc.) with each child during every statutory visit.
- I will ensure the direct work is purposeful and enables me to understand the child's life better and what they would like to see change in their life. I will be imaginative in the type of activities I use to best engage each child.
- I will analyse the work I do with the child so that I have a better understanding of their wishes & feelings. I will use this information to inform planning to support the child & their family.
- I will inform the adults around the child of the child's wishes & feelings (if the child is happy for me to do this) to help the adults make the necessary changes to improve the outcomes for the child.
- I will attach the direct work to the assessment / case note that it relates to so the child can see it if they access their records when they are older.

4.3 Standard 3 – Working in partnership

I will work in partnership with families

Why?

One of the principles of the Children Act 1989 is that the Local Authority works in partnership with families. If we wish to achieve good outcomes for children we need to work well with the people that care about the children the most; their own family. If we do not work in partnership, and we try and tell people what to do, they are likely to disengage with us. At this point we will struggle to really support them and make an impact on the outcome for the children.

How?

- I will make sure that family members / support networks are able to speak when I phone them; I won't just start talking at them.
- I will give family members / support networks my contact details and respond to their phone calls in a timely manner.
- I will not use written agreements.
- I will include the immediate family, wider family and friends in the assessment to ensure I have a good understanding of what life is like for the child.
- I will facilitate Support Network Meetings to ensure that the family are able to come up with their own plan of how they will meet the children's needs / keep them safe.
- I will complete assessments and pre-meeting reports on time and share them with the family so that they have time to read and understand the information before any meetings take place.
- I will make sure my assessments and reports are clear, understandable and jargon free.
- I will keep children, family members, support networks up to date as to what is happening to support them.

4.4 Standard 4 - SMART and purposeful plans

I will make sure that every action in each child's plan is SMART and purposeful and will make a difference to the child's life.

Why?

If plans are not SMART and purposeful, people don't know:

- WHY they are doing something
- WHAT they are meant to be doing
- HOW it is meant to be done
- HOW it is meant to improve a child's life
- WHEN it is meant to be done by

How?

I will ask myself the following question before I meet with the family to devise a plan: "What is the overall PURPOSE of this plan?" I will ensure that the purpose is linked to the outcomes that I want to see for the child.

- I will ask myself the following 5 questions before I sign off any actions within the plan:
 - Is this action something SPECIFIC – can I tell if the person has done it or not?
 - Is this action something I can use to MEASURE progress and impact over time?

- Is this action something ACHIEVEABLE – can the person actually do it?
 - Is this action REALISTIC – will it really make a difference to the child if it is achieved?
 - Is this action something TIMELY – can I easily review it to see the progress / impact over time?
- If the answers to the questions are ‘no’ I will re-write the action to ensure I can answer ‘yes’.
 - I won’t use the term “on-going” in my plans. If an action is on-going I will ensure there is a review date to ensure the impact this action is having on the child’s life is measured regularly.
 - I will make sure that decisions are made at the right time to enable the right service to put be in place for a child/family.
 - I will make sure the actions in the plan are clear and understandable for the family.
 - I will make sure the actions in the plan are linked to the assessment and recommended outcomes.

4.5 Standard 5 – No drift or delay

I will ensure that no child will be subjected to “drift or delay” in terms of the planning, support and permanency.

Why?

“You may delay, but time will not”, Benjamin Franklin. It’s really important that we get things right for our children, and we get them right at the right time. Leaving a child at home too long can cause further physical / emotional harm to them, not focussing on permanency can also cause psychological harm as they feel adrift and unsettled. Time is passing and children grow up fast; it’s really important that we progress plans in a timely manner to ensure that children have that permanent placement (be that at home or with others) as soon as possible.

How?

- I will review plans regularly to measure the impact they are having.
- I will challenge adults (family/friends/professionals) who are not completing their actions in plans to make sure they are doing their best for the children.
- I will change plans if they are not having an impact.
- I will escalate cases if the plans continue to not have an impact.

4.6 Standard 6 – Outcomes and impact

I will make sure that I am outcomes focussed. I will make sure that the plan that is in place for each child has a positive impact on their life – and if it doesn’t I will change the plan.

Why?

Once a plan is in place the focus can often be to get the actions completed and we can forget to focus on whether or not the plan has made the child's life any better. If all of the actions are completed, but life does not improve for the child (there has been no impact) – what was the point of the plan? The plan needs to be SMART and purposeful, but it also needs to have an IMPACT.

How?

- The key to measuring impact at the end of an intervention is to know where things were at the beginning – I will make sure I have a way of “measuring” what life is like for a child at the beginning of a plan. I will use direct work, scaling questions, and questionnaires to do this.
- I will repeat my measure during the plan's lifetime to measure any progress / impact so far. If there has been no impact I will analyse why this may be and consider changing the plan.
- I will repeat my measure at the end of the plan/specific piece of work to formally record the impact that it has had on the child's life – this will support the child's understanding of their life should they chose to access their records when they are older.
- I will record the outcomes that the family are aiming for, as well as the outcomes that professionals are aiming for.
- I will record the small meaningful outcomes as well as the significant outcomes (small increase in school attendance, making new friends etc) to ensure I demonstrate the child's lived experience.
- I will consider the impact that simply having a social worker may have on the child (positive and negative).
- If a plan is not having an impact because of “non-engagement” I will consider how I record this. It is not the family's job to engage. It is my job to engage the family.
- I will consider how the child/family view the impact that the plan is having on them and record this as well as the views of professionals.
- I will record the overall impact of the plan in the Case Summary.

4.7 Standard 7 – Permanency

I will consider the long term (permanent) plan for each child I am working with from the first time I meet them.

Why?

All children need a clear permanency plan to feel safe and secure. If they don't have a permanent plan, both physical and psychological they may find it harder to reach their full potential. It is your job to ensure that they have a plan of permanency, whether that be with their parents, wider family, connected people, foster carers or adopters.

How?

- I will complete a genogram so I know who the important people are in the child's life.
- I will talk to the child about their family and friends so that I know who they see as important in their life.
- I will include absent mothers/fathers in my assessments / permanency planning.
- I will consider and discuss permanency in my assessments and analyse the information I have.
- I will hold Support Network Meetings to ensure that family and friends of the child are supporting them.
- I will hold Family Group Conferences when needed to ensure that all the right people are assessed and included in a child's life.
- I will complete viabilities as soon as they are needed.
- I will consider permanency in statutory visits; not just thinking about the child's lived experience today but what it may look like in the future if this situation / placement were to continue / end.
- I will discuss permanency in my supervision; as a topic in and of itself and for individual children.
- I will write the permanency plans in the Case Summary, followed by a contingency plan. I will carefully consider what the contingency plan is – not simply write “seek legal advice”.
- I will consider what a good transition looks like if a child has to move placement or Social Worker and I ensure I plan early and support the child with the transition.
- If a child is looked after I will take my corporate responsibility seriously and encourage other professionals to do the same.
- I will do all I can to support placements to continue.

4.8 Standard 8 – Children's lives

I will make sure children understand experiences.

Why?

Children in care often report that they don't understand how or why they ended up in care. Sometimes they “fill in the gaps”. Children need to know their own history so that they can make sense of their situation, their identity and their world. It's not enough for us to think the children can access their records when they are an adult; they need to know now.

How?

- I will talk to children about their life experiences.
- I will use various direct work tools to help me talk to children about their life experiences. I will be imaginative with the tools and use different ones dependent upon the child's age, culture, disability etc.

- I will work with families to create a Words & Pictures explanation for the children I am working with on a child in need or child protection plan so that they understand why they have a Social Worker. This includes children who are privately fostered.
- I will work with families to create a Words & Pictures explanation for children when they are bought into care so that they understand what led to them being removed from their home. This includes children who are placed with friends/family.
- I will work with families to create a Words & Pictures explanation for children when permanency has been achieved so they can understand their circumstances.
- Sometimes I will create 1 Words & Pictures explanation, sometimes I will create multiple explanations – this will depend on how long I have been working with the children and if their circumstances change.
- I will ensure that children in care have life story work completed with them to help them to understand their situation in the future.

4.9 Standard 9 – Recording

I will make sure that children’s records are up to date, jargon free and show clear decision making.

Why?

In the short term, records need to be up to date to enable your colleagues to support a family if there is a crisis and you are on leave or it is out of hours.

In the medium term, families need to be able to understand the reports and plans that you write. They need them to be jargon free and they need them to be up to date so that they can follow the plan for their child. Records also need to be up to date and show clear decision making to ensure that when your work is audited / seen by Ofsted you are given a fair judgement for the work that you have done with a family. It’s such a shame when really good work that has had an impact on a child’s life is not seen for what it is because recording is poor.

In the longer term, for some children their ICS record may be the only way they can fully make sense of their story as an adult. They will have had some explanations growing up and will have their Words & Pictures explanations but as they get older they may want more of the detail of their story and more detail on why decisions were made. If ICS recording is poor they will have gaps in their story. They may have questions that can never be answered because you didn’t record the answers, your decision making or hypothesis.

How?

- I will use language that families and professionals can all understand. I will explain what acronyms mean; not just using initials of agencies without explaining what service they provide.
- I will use language that honours families and their strengths, even when the focus is on things that have not gone well.

- I will be clear and concise with my recording, ensuring the point of what I am writing is clear.
- I won't use vague statements such as "historic domestic violence". I will be clear about the information I record.
- I will analyse the information I am recording, ensuring I answer the questions, "What does this information mean to the plan? What is the impact of this information on the child?"
- I will adhere to timescales in respect of recording statutory visits and meeting minutes.
- I will adhere to timescales in respect of assessments and pre-meeting reports.
- I will ensure my case summary is updated at least every 3 months, but more regularly if circumstances change.
- I will ensure that family/friends detail, including contact details are up to date.
- I will record decisions that are made, and the rationale for them as well.
- I will ensure my case records are up to date before I go on leave.
- I will write my records in a way that I would be proud to show the child when they are an adult.

4.10 Standard 10 – THE GOLDEN THREAD

I will never lose sight of the "Golden Tread" when I am working with a family.

Why?

The golden tread is so important. It is the reason that a family have been referred to Children's Social Care e.g. home conditions, domestic violence, substance misuse etc. What can sometimes happen is a family are referred in for one issue, but during the assessment 3 more issues arise and the initial concern can fade into the background. It is important that children's needs are fully assessed and none are forgotten about; that assessments are holistic. Some needs may require more urgent attention than others, but before a family is closed to Children's Social Care we should be satisfied that the risk in all areas has been reduced and that the golden thread has been followed all the way through the work with the family.

How?

- I will read the family's story (ICS records) before I meet them.
- I will read the chronology in the record and ensure that I keep it up to date whilst I work with the family.
- I will be clear as to why the family is open to Children's Social Care.
- I will talk to the family about the reason they were referred to Children's Social Care.
- I will speak to the children to ensure their wishes & feelings have been heard and acted upon.
- I will speak with the children to ensure that they feel that things have improved in their life.

- I will make sure any plans that are in place address ALL of the issues; even if some of the work is on hold to prioritise other areas of need or risk.
- I will make sure my closure summary refers back to the initial referral; evidencing that the Golden Thread has been followed throughout.