



MORE HUMANE, A CONVERSATION

A CHANGE IN ATMOSPHERE

# CAMDEN CONVERSATIONS

OUR FAMILY-LED CHILD PROTECTION ENQUIRY





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CAMDEN CONVERSATIONS

# Themes

Building relationships by acknowledging what is happening and acting on what is needed

Maintaining a relationship with good communication and good people skills - 'Worked with' rather than 'done to'.

Bring transparent and avoiding jargon when having difficult conversations

Building relationships by valuing and empowering families

Being caring, curious, holding people's life journey in mind

Inviting feedback on practice

Building relationships by lessening the fear and powerlessness felt by families

Recognising the importance of 'action'

Conflict resolution, and inviting both parent's contribution through being better at engaging dads and young parents.



# Summary of Recommendations

There are many shared goals between family members and professionals to promote hopeful and helpful conversations that values the expertise of families with experiences of child protection services. Their recommendations are as follows:

1. **Develop “Independent Peer Advocacy”** as a preventative tool offered across Early Help, Child in Need and Child Protection stages, including at Child Protection Conferences.
2. A **review of language used**, which connects to the community and reaches out to minority groups.
3. Where timescales allow, **Family Group Conferences to be offered** and FGC Plan considered at Child Protection Conferences.
4. **Explore community venues, more flexible timing and role of peer advocacy** in Child Protection Conference
5. **Child Protection Chair/ IRO to meet family beforehand/ in between conference to encourage family input.** Including, allowing families and the Chair to be in the conference room first.
6. **Multi-agency professional to join the meeting**, limited to one professional per agency.
7. **Enable families to understand the Child Protection process** and timescales and allow Child Protection conferences to make time to make a plan.
8. **Identify creative and digital ways to allow feedback/debrief** with support from advocates.
9. **Multi-disciplinary Camden Conversations Training on “Empowering Families”** and consider ways to acknowledge the power dynamics between parent and frontline professional.
10. Look at **opportunities for multi-agency professionals to critically reflect on the Child Protection system**, how can we do better, what does a more participative process look like?
11. **Review support offer to birth parents**, before, during and post child protection stages.

Full recommendations on page 58 of the report.





# Introduction

Following the completion of a research project by the Tavistock Centre that sought the views of family members who had experienced child protection services in Camden, Camden Safeguarding Children Board invited the Family

Advisory Board (FAB) to consult with other families and partners to recommend ways of improving the service.

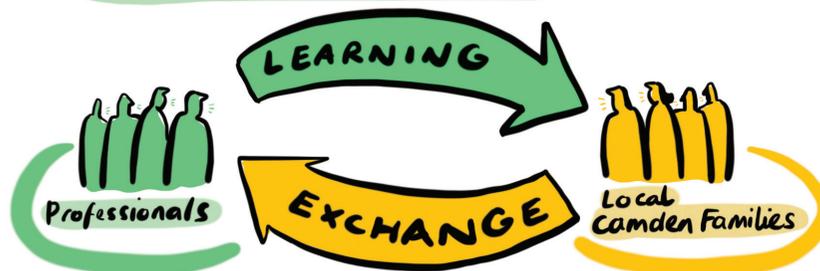
A meeting was held in August 2017 of the Camden FAB where some of the findings of the Tavistock research were discussed and many similarities noted and parallels drawn with the experiences of members of the FAB.

The opportunity to engage in further discussion with families experiencing child protection interventions and professionals to work towards aiming for more effective and inclusive services was welcomed.

## Backstory: 2014

Family Advisory Board in Camden is formed of local experts by experience

## 2016: creation of the



Co-designed and delivered by Annie from Surviving Safeguarding

## Back story of the Family Advisory Board

The Family Advisory Board was formed in 2014 as a means of learning from the experiences of people in the community who had used Camden services.

In 2016, the first “Empowering Families” learning exchange workshop was co-designed and delivered by “Annie”, author of Surviving Safeguarding with the Family Advisory Board.



## Starting the conversation!

It was a bold move; permitting service users to facilitate training for AYSE workers and inviting Camden family members who had experience of the system (and not always positive ones!) to start a conversation.

Out of this context the “Family-led Child Protection Enquiry” participatory research was borne. What if we empower families with experience of the system to interview other families and professionals? What if we could be bold and innovative? What if we could celebrate what was going well in Camden, and find solutions to what needed attention – from the very people both using services and providing them?

So, that’s what we did.

What we hoped to achieve:

Camden child protection can change by being human



In an ideal world child protection conferences would be a conversation instead of a meeting



constructive dialogue

# Method



In order to achieve this, a participatory approach was used. This involved family members centrally in the design, implementation and recommendations of the Enquiry. Humphries (2003: 89) suggests that ‘participatory approaches arguably increase the validity of evidence, since they attempt to identify the concerns that matter to people directly affected by public policy’.

Participatory approaches have been used internationally to reform child protection systems, with the skills and knowledge held by families being used through a process of co-production to transform practice, services and policies (see for example Ivec, 2013). Featherstone et al. (2018a) stress the

importance of conversations across ‘divides’ to open up new understandings, identify opportunities for coproduction and promote connections between groups who are often constructed in opposition.

Adult social care, including disability and mental health services, have a more established history of co-producing knowledge and services with experts by experience and this is specifically introduced in the statutory guidance accompanying the Care Act 2014.

Although primarily about adult social care, the ideas outlined in the guidance are relevant for provision of services to children and families.



## HOW CAMDEN CONVERSATIONS HAPPENED:

Parents are finding the Child Protection process very difficult

I feel vulnerable and uncomfortable in child protection conferences



PARENTS

RESEARCH  
Child Protection conferences are hard and quite official. They can feel very 'blaming'

& RESEARCH FINDINGS

Let's try to find out more - to help families take care of their children



Let's use Camden Conversations to start a participatory research project

A PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH PROJECT IS BORN



*“In developing and delivering preventative approaches to care and support, local authorities should ensure that individuals are not seen as passive recipients of support services but are able to design care and support based around achievement of their goals. Local authorities should actively promote participation in providing interventions that are co-produced with individuals, families, friends, carers and the community.”*

– DH, 2017

This project is premised on the belief that building dialogue and co-constructing services and practices offers a means of opening up new and innovative responses to protecting children and supporting their families.

This enquiry is Family-led and gives the perspective of parents and family members on the system, with a shared goal of keeping children safe and giving them love. The illustrations in this report tell the story of its making and also show the overlapping dialogue and common thinking of the professionals and families involved. We are grateful to Sandra Howgate for the drawings she made directly from what Camden people said about Child Protection in this enquiry.

This Enquiry involved a number of stages:

## 1. Preparatory work

A core group of family members and participants on the Camden Family Advisory Board

(FAB) participated in two workshops undertaken to:

- a) further develop the methodology, refine the research questions and create the interview schedule; and b) prepare family members as peer researchers.

## 2. Data collection

**Family members:** Interviews and focus group discussions with family members who have been involved with child protection services were conducted by FAB researchers, supported by FGC coordinators. 6 interviews were conducted with individual family members and focus groups that involved 25 family members in total. The schedule for the interviews and focus group discussions with family members are included in the Appendix. In addition, focus group participants were asked to complete a trigger question sheet, also included in the Appendix.

**Professionals:** Interviews and focus group discussions with social workers and managers in Camden conducted by FAB researchers, supported by FGC coordinators. 6 individual interviews were conducted and focus groups with 25 professional participants. The schedule for the interviews and focus group discussions with participants are included in the Appendix. In addition, focus group participants were asked to complete a trigger question sheet, also included in the Appendix.

## 3. Analysis

The interviews were tape recorded and these were transcribed. Notes were taken during the focus groups and the responses to trigger questions collated. The transcripts and written data from the focus groups were thematically analysed by three members of the project team. A preliminary analysis of the findings were discussed with the FAB.

## 4. Report

The production of this report and recommendations for Camden Local Safeguarding Children Board.



*These all took place between September 2017 and September 2018 at **OUR SPACES***



*I never thought I would be back in this office sitting down, leading this conversation.*

**PARENT FEEDBACK**



## Participants

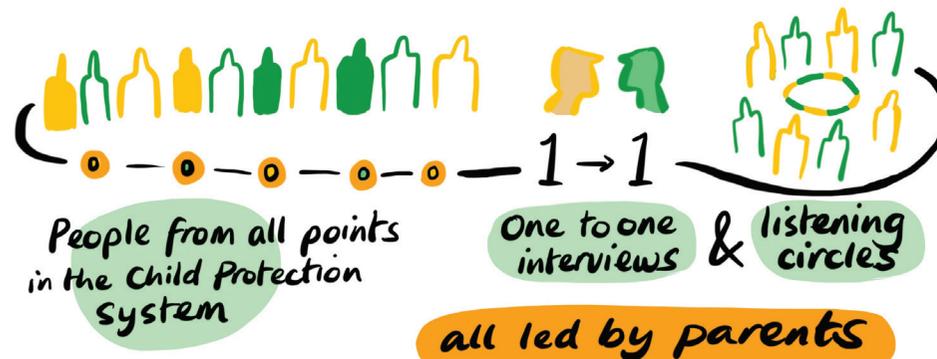
- From 'all points in the system'
- Family members with experience of services; Early Help; Child in Need; Child Protection; Parents of children looked after; Birth parents of adopted children.
- Professionals with roles in services; Early Help; Children's Social Work; Adults Social Care; Education; Youth Offending; Health.
- Staff from different levels; Workers; Seniors; Team Managers; Independent Reviewing Officers; Child Protection Chairs; Service Managers; Heads of Service.

## Demographic info of all participants

- Black British Caribbean - 8
- British Asian - 8
- Asian Other - 1
- Black British African - 3
- White British - 27
- White Other - 2
- British Chinese - 1

## Who & what is involved ?

50 people **25 families** **25 professionals**



## Project team

Note that this report was written by 'experts by experience', the findings are the product of Camden families & professionals words and the preparation of the report itself was led by 'expert by experience' Annie, author of Surviving Safeguarding in close consultation with family members from Camden. Sandra Howgate provided the illustrations.

## Project Support

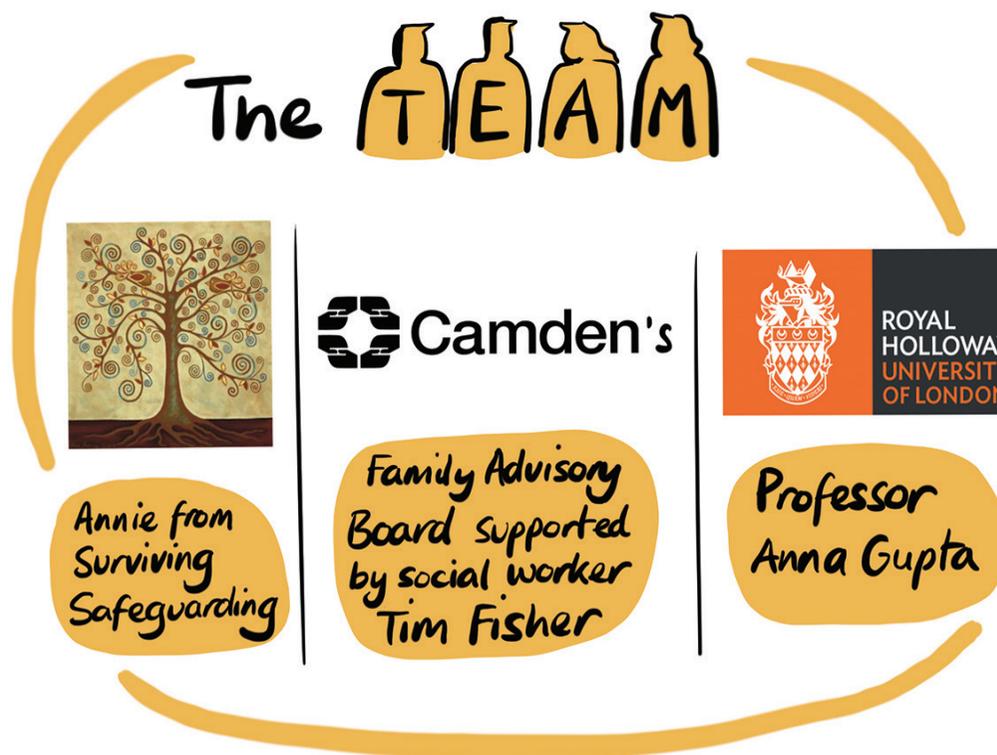
Tim Fisher social worker and Service Manager for family group conference and Restorative Practice coordinated the process and was involved in the organization, data analysis and report preparation. Annie, author of Surviving Safeguarding, undertook the transcription, provided support for the FAB researchers, participated in the data analysis and led the preparation of the report. Prof. Anna Gupta from Royal Holloway, University of London provided academic support, including peer researcher training, data analysis and contributed to the report writing.

## Acknowledgements

Family Member interviewers, facilitators and organizers; Clarissa Stevens; Kevin Makwikila; Faye Hamilton; Sandra Drummond.

Professionals and FGC Coordinators who supported interviews and connected Camden.

Conversations with family members; James Owen; Gail Neill; Kat Hartnett; Lorraine Ibison; Judit Ferrando; Cherry Rhoden; Warsan Egal.



## A RELATIONSHIP WORKS WELL WHEN...

- You feel comfortable enough to open up and get the help that you need
- When people feel valued and respected

- You feel comfortable with the other person
- There is trust and respect





CAMDEN CONVERSATIONS

## Themes

Throughout the course of the enquiry, we found a number of themes emerging. These are detailed below, alongside some direct quotes from participants and relevant academic research which might serve to develop our understanding.

## Relationships

*“...by the nature of what we do, we’re coming into people’s lives at a time when things are really difficult and that can make it really difficult to form relationships.” – professional*



The enquiry heard that families’ relationships with social workers often begin at times of difficulty or crisis. Personal relationships mostly don’t start this way and if they do, they could even be detrimental rather than supportive ones. Compounded with that, is the fact that a social worker’s relationship with a family will often be a relatively short term one. The ideal is to get the family back on their feet and then leave.

*“Relationships are about you and me and the space between us, and what happens in that space. Relationships can bend with you, they are changing and living, they ebb and flow. Our current framework is transactional. It is about managing, handling, treating and transferring. Transactions are useful. We need to get from A to B or we need an operation to mend a broken bone. But a transactional approach cannot solve the biggest challenges we face.”*

– Cottam, 2018: 277 - Radical Help



## Building a relationship by acknowledging what is happening and acting on what is needed:

The family members who were interviewed wanted social workers to acknowledge what was going on for them; the strengths and the concerns. Family members said that often what they needed most was practical, straightforward support. This applied to arrangements for children, communication between families and workers and signposts to services.



*“...they [the social workers] got me in contact with lots of different agencies, like Sure Start and people like that, and I suppose got a network going, kind of thing, a support system. And I actually really loved my social worker – and then he left! I was so upset!” – family member*



*“I needed support, I needed someone to hold my hand, I needed that social worker to nurture me...” – family member*

Camden professionals highlighted creative ways they have found to engage with families and to see things from their point of view, although most professionals interviewed felt this was something that could be improved upon.



*“Families often want to focus on the here and now...it works well to engage with that” – professional*

Most people think I am...

- Warm
- Approachable

- Kind hearted
- Approachable



*“...one of the teams has it where one member of the team comes to the meeting and is “the child”, so they sit there and the only thing they’re allowed to say is to give a view in a role play, as if they were the child. Just to keep people from getting lost in ‘policy’ and departmental processes and things. So, this person can say “well you might be talking about this, but this doesn’t make any difference to me...I’m still going to have no one to pick me up on Thursday night after school because dad’s doing this...” – professional*



## Building a relationship by valuing and empowering families

The Camden Conversations found that families felt it was important to feel listened to and valued as a member of the “team around the child”. They felt to build a relationship with a worker meant that worker needing to “avoid assumptions”, and “show understanding and empathy”. Despite common misconceptions, most – not all - wanted to work with the local authority and were seeking their help.

*“Even in the court, the judge said we have to work together to get her back home. And I’m trying to explain to the social worker, I’m not [the type of] person you can take my daughter away from me...we have to work together to get her back. Not fight.” – family member*



The research found that the social worker’s approach was vital and that it was their responsibility to ensure that each member of the family was included, particularly fathers.



*“The social worker’s approach could make the relationship difficult. Their approach has an impact. I’ve seen where I was ignored as a father – and that made it difficult. But where I was acknowledged and taken into consideration, it wasn’t difficult.” – family member*

## **Building a relationship by lessening the fear and powerlessness felt by families**

There was a recurring theme throughout the interviews with family members of them feeling powerless and frightened. Which could often result in dishonesty with workers, or conversely family members overly complying with them.

*“I was terrified! Absolutely terrified! So that I would do and say what I thought would be what they wanted to hear, not how I felt. Because they had the power, and that’s how it felt throughout the whole process, that they were just looking down on me, like hawks.” – family member*



*“That relationship [with the social worker] was very very difficult the whole way through, and I would – upon reflection – put it down to openness and transparency, because I wasn’t being honest, because I was scared; I was in fight-or-flight or freeze even.” – family member*



Professionals interviewed highlighted the challenges of building relationships with pre-existing stigma, linked to the fear and powerlessness that families were feeling. A view emerged that it was important to further explore how social workers overcome built in stigma in the system and unpack negative feelings about social workers in the one to one helping relationship.



*“she used to be really aggressive to me. She was in Southampton and I’d go all the way up to see her and she’d tell me to f\*\*k off. But, we formed a really good relationship ... I’m a relationship-based worker – and it’s about the use of self within that relationship.” – professional*

## Maintaining a relationship with good communication and good people skills

Once that relationship has formed its base, professionals and family members said it was vital to work to maintain it, through assessments and the outcome of social care involvement. Families valued timely responses to their calls or texts, and they valued workers taking the time to explain processes, particularly around care proceedings.



*“I met some social workers who, when going for a PLO, were very, I’d say, straight to the point. They had that people skills when they introduced themselves, gave a little bit of space for me to understand them, a little bit about who they are so then I could talk about me. Because it’s such a quick process, it’s so fast and overwhelming” – family member*

*“And I always looked forwards to the visits, rather than...it would never be the opposite, where you’d be dreading it and thinking “oh my god, here’s another visit from the social worker”. He was just really easy to talk to, sit down and have a cup of tea, or whatever.” – family member*



Most of all, family members said they want workers who are genuinely interested in their family’s lives – and this can be the greatest tool of all for engagement.

The experiences of family members who participated in the Enquiry echoed other recent studies involving families. Feelings of powerlessness, fear, blame, shame and distrust permeate, and can lead to avoidance and defensiveness; dynamics that inevitably disrupt the potential for effective protective and promotional work with children and families (Smithson and Gibson, 2017; Gupta et al., 2018).

The families and professionals also spoke of the importance of relationships and what ‘good practice’ looks like in very similar ways to other studies: the importance of good communication, listening to people’s views, being respectful and honest, recognising strengths, displaying acts of kindness, and treating people as individuals (Featherstone et al., 2018b).

In Morris et al.’s (2018) study capturing the experiences of families with children involved with multiple welfare services found that qualities of the workers that are picked out as uniquely helpful are largely interpersonal; empathic, honest, timely, confident and kind, rather than specific professional knowledge or training.

## Theme



# The role of the Social Worker

*'...social workers are perhaps one of the most intimate relationships [individuals] have with the state, and it's someone who has a lot of power over them...if that person is not treating them with recognition and respect, what it's doing to their self-esteem, their sense of themselves, regardless of the success of the social work relationship, is actually terribly damaging. It's reinforcing all the negative stuff they're seeing in the media or hear politicians talk...'*

– ATD Fourth World family member – Gupta et al., 2018

## 'Worked with' rather than 'done to'

When thinking about the role of the social worker power is a key issue. As aforementioned, the recurring theme throughout the research was that family members feeling powerless and helpless throughout the child protection process.

The very nature of the legal framework around child protection left many families often feeling "done to". Conversely, many family members interviewed then spoke positively about social work experiences when they were "worked with". It's important to hold in mind the experiences of these families prior to, or during

social work involvement; that they may have had many incidents within their lives where they were "done to", whether that be by individuals or by services. This then shapes their narrative and feeds into their feelings of powerlessness.

Legislation dictates that child protection needs to operate in a certain way, but families felt helped when they were worked with, rather than done to. Professionals too felt that they could be there to work with a family to facilitate change.

I had success the other day when...

- Someone showed genuine care and interest
- Someone listened to me and explained to me

- I had a cup of tea with a parent and let them say what they wanted to
- With my help someone understood what was happening



## Listen to people and take account of their whole lives

Within the research, often heard was a message from families, that once child protection procedures were initiated; it became about child protection. That may seem like an obvious statement, but what it meant to Camden families was that they felt defined by their difficulties and the concerns around their parenting. All the “good bits” were forgotten. Professionals echoed this.



*“So, for me personally, when I’ve needed help they’ve helped me. They supported me, I was becoming a full-time dad; I needed to know what to do. I didn’t know what to do – this was all new! I’ve never gone to sign up for a GP, school, nursery and all these other things – I don’t know, I never knew about all this.” – family member*



*“I had one mum who kept her kid... And she made the decision she was going to change; I could facilitate it and I could open the door for her, but she was the one that decided she had the resilience and she was going to get off the drugs, and she kept her child.” (professional)*



## Caring, curiosity and holding people's whole lives in mind.

A number of recent studies highlight the importance of professionals understanding the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which families live, and the struggles many of them face, especially with 'austerity' policies leading to benefit changes and cuts to community support services.

However, within the child protection system often this contextual understanding is lacking, with individualised explanations for parents' problems (see for example Featherstone et al., 2018a; Hyslop & Keddell, 2018).

One of the messages interweaved throughout most of our interviews with family members was the importance of empathy and an understanding of the practical difficulties the families were experiencing. It would have been very difficult to pick out one "quote"

that sums this up from a family member's perspective, because it was entwined with their all experiences of social work, positive and negative. However, what was clear is that caring, professional curiosity and holding people's whole lives in mind was a core value of social work that families both needed and welcomed.



*"I think good practice is about trying to be strength-based as much as possible; trying to look at what the family is doing well and that is not just solely focused on what the problems are and what people aren't doing as well as they could do. I think you have to be appreciative of the fact of the family – whether they are doing it grudgingly or through gritted teeth – if they are allowing you as a worker into their home and into their lives then you have to be very appreciative of that, and appreciative of all of the things that they are doing well" – professional*



*"it took me a while to understand that it was neglect; it's quite difficult. If you come from a different cultural background, you have different levels. And me and my ex-partner, we both had different standards. And I remember asking the social worker lots of different times, and she eventually told me it was neglect, and she explained "because this is happening, because you're not focused on this", that's neglect." – family member*



*“When I first started doing social work, one of the managers in my team said something that stuck with me. She said “when you’re on your way to see somebody, on your way to somebody’s house, rather than just like sticking your headphones in and reading the paper on the bus, just try and spend that half an hour on the bus, or on the way there thinking about when you get there, what you’re going to talk about. What questions you’re going to ask to enable you to come from a point or perspective of curiosity and interest rather than going in there and saying, “well this is what I’ve heard, and this is what needs to happen”. Just being more appreciative of what the family is going through, more appreciative of how hard things are looking after 1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7 kids and how difficult that is, and just taking that time.”*

*– professional*

## **The importance of action**

Family members and professionals consistently spoke of the need for action. That it was not enough to come into homes and list concerns. That it was too much to expect families to find ways to make changes alone because they don’t always know what services are in the community to help.

That sometimes families just needed social workers to do, to act. This is not easy for families; they are allowing professionals into their lives at times of great vulnerability and great stress. Sometimes, that helping hand is really needed.

*"I do have a positive experience of social workers, I was a refugee and a single parent, I needed support... understanding what I needed. I needed action." – family member*



*"When I lecture to social workers who are in training, I say "I'm not interested in where you're going to refer; I'm interested in what you're going to do. Don't tell me about the services you're going to refer to – tell me about what you're going to do to create change in families".*  
– professional



*"I didn't know what I could get, so I didn't want anything. I didn't ask for any service. I was homeless – I didn't ask for any advice. I should have asked."*  
– family member



*"I think then you're wasting the opportunities because we are enormously privileged in the sense that we are going into people's homes and seeing them at their most vulnerable and asking people to bear their souls and air their dirty laundry in front of us. So, if we're doing that, then I think we have to make sure we are doing it in the right way, and we are thinking about it carefully and thinking about how it feels to go through that and expose yourself in that way to professionals." – professional*



## Clear as mud; transparency and jargon

Within our interviews with family members, one of the questions we asked was “Did you understand the role of the social worker?”. Families were not always clear about why a social worker was involved, what a social worker could do, and what a social worker couldn’t do. Families were often influenced by poor media depictions of social work, or by horror stories in the news.

If the role of the social worker was not then made clear, this would impact upon families’ engagements.

Language was an extremely important part of this for professionals that spoke to the enquiry; families do not “speak the language” of social work or family law and some felt that this excluded them. “There is too much jargon!” said one.

*“That’s one of the things I always like to do on a first visit, try to be really transparent in what I view to be my role, and allow space for them to ask any questions about my role. And I think if you don’t do that initially, there can be so many misunderstandings further down the line. Sometimes I’ve found out further down the line that a family still doesn’t really understand what we’re trying to do and that perhaps shows that we haven’t done that first bit of work well enough.” – professional*



*“They said I was inconsistent, and I was quite young; I didn’t know what that meant, I went to look it up and I was like “what?!”. I looked it up and it was because I wasn’t doing the same days, some days on different weeks and stuff like that. So, I changed my routine, and I made sure I had my son every two weeks on a Friday because that’s what my work allowed me to do. So, for me, good social work is about being very understanding, being very open...” – family member*



*“you’re trying to set out what you’ve written down in your assessment in a way that’s jargon-free and not just using lots of technical language, because I think is a real barrier to people understanding.” – professional*



*“I had to tell them “some of these words aren’t making sense, can you explain or elaborate”. So, I used to get a bit more vocal, and ask them to elaborate on what they were talking about, because it’s a different language. And I didn’t come from that background; English was not my strongest.” – family member*



## **Inviting feedback on practice directly from users of services with as well as using supervision**

All of the professionals interviewed felt strongly that there was much to be gained by seeking feedback from families, even if these were sometimes difficult conversations. The timing of the feedback was important; more than one family member talked about being given feedback forms to complete immediately after a CP conference, and that they just weren’t in the right frame of mind to be able to do this. Sometimes families have had

previous experiences with social workers, or other professionals and this can impact upon their engagement with their current worker, and the trust and faith they may have in them. Part of our recommendations include the sourcing and timing of feedback, and how this can best be achieved, as it was a recurring theme throughout interviews with families and professionals.

Being able to critically reflect on values and assumptions, and learn from feedback from individuals and families is crucial, and supervision was identified by professionals as an important forum for this:

*“I think it’s worked quite well sometimes when I’ve been able to revisit with families some things that have happened in the past or in previous episodes of social work involvement and allow them some space to talk through what maybe didn’t feel so helpful, or what did feel helpful and try to connect with that and learn from that.” – professional*



*“Good supervision is important; the thinking space to then go away and plan something where you’re doing that meaningful work with families and not slipping into that automatic mode.” – professional*



*“I think it’s really important that service users are involved in the service and are consulted but social workers get such a bashing, so that as a result of that consultation social workers get bashed – it’s really hard isn’t it? Because you’ve got to hear the stuff that is genuine, you’ve got to hear the stuff about how to improve your service to make it more accessible to people and make it helpful, but you’ve got to take that away from people that are really angry that they’re involved in services at all ....sometimes we need to hear from the parents who haven’t had a positive experience.” – professional*



*“If you find someone who is good, he feels it, he loves his job – this is very important – he loves what he does. He’s coming here for the children, to support the kids, to support the family...” – family member*



**Finally, if you love your job...it shows!**

## Theme



# The role of the Parent

*'Children are part of families – a social worker cannot 'only be the child's social worker'*

– birth mother – The Adoption Enquiry, Featherstone et al., 2018b

## Empowering parents with knowledge and understanding

In our interviews with family members, it became clear that parents felt more able to engage if they understood the process. The responsibility to ensure parents understand the process undoubtedly falls to the social worker. However, some family members interviewed and in the focus groups did not have that experience. Some parents began to research the child protection process by using the internet, which – as parents and practitioners know – is not always the most reliable source of high-quality information designed to help a family engage. Within our recommendations, we tackle this issue as it is a prevalent, and pertinent one.



*"To be honest, I don't remember them explaining my rights to me. All I remember is that I went on the internet, I read about parental responsibility, and I read the law behind it and I read the rights I had – and I read what I could push for and what I couldn't push for. And I went back there, and I challenged them, like there was no tomorrow. So, they never told me my rights. They gave me a letter, a paper on what child protection is – I don't think I read that to be honest." – family member*

Children need ...

Love

Love





*“So, I started to challenge them; making sure they were giving me information in advance, and that was very positive. So, they became very aware that I knew what I was talking about and I knew what I needed, and they started sending me information. I’d get letters, I’d get phone calls, telling me about situations, when my son went to the hospital, they made sure they informed me and told me what would happen.” – family member*



*“Written resources are needed, so they can be given to the parents, explaining each type of intervention, meetings and processes. I.e. Section 17, CP Process, CP Plan etc...These to be written by the parents, from their perspective.” – family member*

## Parents as peers, partners and experts

Throughout our research, and in fact prior to this research being undertaken, a strong message was coming from families; treat us as equals. When parents are treated as experts in their own family’s lives – and this goes for children too – they are far more likely to feel part of the “team around the child”, and thus far more likely to engage. A wonderful example of this is below:



*“And I’d say if the person is willing to learn, give them the opportunity to learn. Because I had social workers where, after my son was exposed to some emotional stuff, we would have discussions, and they would reference me some books that they’d come across. If they’re good social workers, they’ve got to have knowledge, not just an understanding of the family, but things like childhood trauma because when social workers are involved, usually children are going through some sort of trauma or challenge, and I had a social worker who was really good at that.” – family member*

This young father was treated as a peer, as a partner, and an important part of the core group for his child. Because he was treated as such, he then went on to learn, with the full support of professionals, how to parent his child in a trauma-informed way.

Families want to be treated as equals, and parents are the people who, in the main, know their children best. Their contribution to meetings and to care plans should be just as important as that of a health visitor, or a teacher.

## Conflict resolution, and both parents' contribution

It is difficult for all families when parents separate, regardless of whether that separation is agreed to be in the children's best interests. Professionals told us that where there has been domestic violence, or abuse, it was general practice to ensure meetings were held with both parents separately, so they are both given the same information and opportunity to contribute.

This is an area which could be improved upon interviewees said, and some thought needs to be given to the best way to do that. One professional interviewed spoke about avoiding a tendency to "blame" mothers, particularly around domestic violence and this is something which is a nationally recognised problem in child protection. The lack of national investment in perpetrator programmes, mentioned by one family in interview, and the cuts to services across our nation have not helped.

*"I was very optimistic, and I was very willing to learn so I felt like, if I didn't know something they should show me, or teach me or tell me... Thinking back to then, I think the only difficulty I experienced with the social worker was not really being heard. Because I was always present, I was always in the meetings, but I didn't feel free – I didn't feel like they wanted to hear from me. I didn't feel like they wanted to take my advice, or my guidance, and for me that was very difficult because it was supposed to be a partnership."*  
– family member





*“They should have provided some service to support us with conflict resolution. Parental conflict is key in a child’s life and I think we don’t talk about it often enough. And if you’re a social worker, you’re working for the child’s needs. So, that’s something you should be taking into consideration, because that has an impact on the child. And there’s nothing wrong with conflict, conflict happens! But there’s a way to sort out conflict – and children need to see that.” – family member*

*“I think you need to remember that they [dads] are a really significant part of the picture and I think it’s really unfair on mothers who often get lumped with so much of the blame. So much of child protection, the focus is on mothers. We’re telling mothers that they need to end relationships with violent partners who they may well be terrified of, and we’re putting the responsibility on them to take those steps to protect themselves and their children. But then we’re not putting any onus on the man to not be abusive, or to not be violent.” – professional*



## Engaging Dads

Historically, child protection services have not been effective in involving fathers in the family work that is needed to achieve safety and wellbeing for children (Maxwell et al., 2012). One of the questions family member interviewers wanted to ask both parents and professionals was around the engagement of fathers within the context of child protection. There is a risk that the role of the father can be minimised, overlooked, or simply not fully engaged with. This was confirmed by the responses from parents and professionals which said that professionals should strive to

engage with dads. Sometimes father do need to be ruled out of caring for their children but, like mothers, there is a humane and respectful way to do this.

The interviewers were told that Camden is blessed with lots of fathers actively engaged in their children's lives and who want to make a difference to the current system. Professionals and families recommended using their expertise and experience to better inform practice and try out new and innovative ways of ensuring the father's role is kept at the forefront of the Camden community.



*"I think they should be listening to fathers more. Personally, I would take father's advice more seriously and consider it more seriously because we both had parental responsibility, and in my case, I had a role in my son's life; I was dropping him into school, picking him up from school, having him on weekends, so technically it was 50/50." – family member*

*“It wasn’t a ‘tick-box’ exercise, or me just gathering evidence because I wanted to rule him out of the process.... I tried to be open and honest and transparent with him about what was going on and the reasons why we were making the decisions. It wasn’t just leaving him hanging without having any understanding about why decisions were being taken. Restricting his contact came before some of the sessions that we did that were emotionally draining, and in spite of that, we were still able to form some kind of professional, therapeutic relationship. Which meant that, even though we were doing some things that he wasn’t happy about and he didn’t like, he still felt like – well – I hope he still felt like we were being honest with him and that he could understand why we were making the decisions and he could understand the process – even if he didn’t necessarily agree with it.” – professional*



*“The importance to include the fathers in the process even if they are not the children’s main carer. It is felt that the mothers are the ones feeling all the pressure from Children’s Services to engage with the process and professionals and this is unfair.” – family member*



## Engaging young parents

A number of studies have identified young parents, especially care experienced young people, as being particularly vulnerable to having their children removed (Lynch, 2016; Roberts et al, 2017). Young parents needs should be taken into account, interviewees told family member interviewers, and yet their

age should not be a block if their parenting is good enough. One professional interviewed talked about brain development and the age at which maturation occurs, and that this can be different for each parent based upon their own childhood experiences.

There were different perspectives over what age a parent ceases to be thought of as “young”. Some thought late teens, some thought as old as 25. Professionals were wary that assumptions not be made by professionals in other services working with young parents.

Often professionals spoke of the young parents who had, or were still, in local authority care and the difficulty in ensuring that their own care needs were not forgotten whilst assessments were undertaken, or plans made around the unborn or new baby. This balance was difficult to get right.



*“I feel sometimes, with young parents, that people in the professional network, sometimes there can be a tendency to ‘mother’ them a little bit and to sometimes treat them like they don’t have the knowledge or the expertise because they are quite young. That can be tricky and an important part of working with them – but not always the case.” – professional*



*“Previously I thought social services just removed children, I thought social services were against young parents, and that’s why I’d always avoided getting in contact with social services directly, asking for support, because I was a young mother and I had that stereotypical view on social services” – family member*



*“if you had to have one rule for social work, it’s not to make any assumptions about anything – never assume anything! I think one thing we can’t do is assume a lack of competence, or a lack of capacity because people are young.” – professional*

I think I am...

- A good person
- Patient
- Doing my best

- A good person
- Kind
- Trying my best



## Theme



# The Role of Advocacy

*'When families and social workers can work collaboratively in the best interests of the children, it builds a better knowledge base for both parties and the outcomes are likely to be better for the children. As you work together, you learn from each other.'*

– Gupta et al., 2016



The parent advocacy projects in New York, described by Tobis (2013), provide compelling evidence about how parents, who had children removed from their care, worked within the system to reform how it worked with families and to support parents in similar situations to keep their children safe. In Australia concerned academics, professionals and community workers actively joined with parents affected by child removal to form the Family Inclusion Network.

Pockets of parent advocacy are currently taking place across the UK.

In Stockport, “Pure Insight” are a group aimed at care leavers who draw on the skills and experience of over 100 care experienced dedicated volunteers who receive intensive

training and supervision, enabling them to mentor Care Leavers for minimum periods of 2 years with many evolving into a long-term friendship. This has now broadened to include care leavers who have become parents.

In Barrow-in-Furness, “Love Barrow Families” provide a unique service of joined-up multi-agency working in collaboration with families. They say: “If we can look after and support families that are going through hard times then maybe there will be less of us that get to the point where professionals have to get involved”

In Edinburgh, Maggie Mellon has helped to set up PAR – Parent Advocacy Rights - a parent led group seeking to support parents with children in the care system, child protection, children’s hearings, and other situations

where they have lost care of their children, or risk losing care. New Beginnings have developed an innovative community outreach approach in Stockport. Re-Frame is a new peer-led collective of parents involved in the child protection and family court systems, and parents involved with Re-Frame have contributed to FAB and this Enquiry.

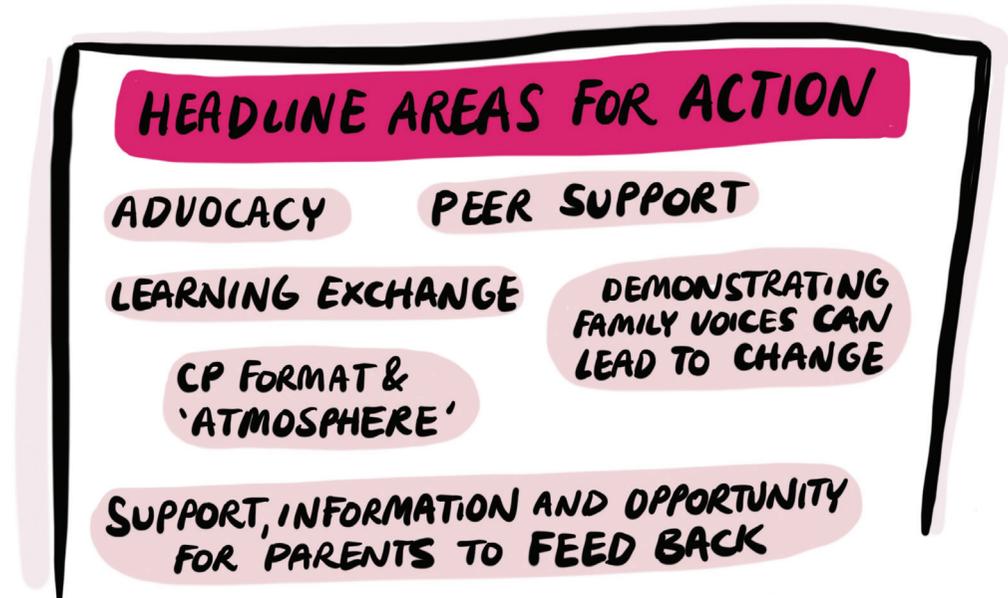
There are many other, relatively small organisations who are now beginning to utilise the skills of local parents to help and support other parents facing difficulties within their own community. The Family Rights Group is a well-known organisation offering professional advocacy, and there are many others throughout the UK, Families in Care based in Newcastle (and used by this report's coauthor Annie!) and ATD Fourth World being just two.

Universally, every single person interviewed or involved in the focus groups, whether family member or professional made a clear case for parent advocacy and felt strongly it would benefit both parent and practitioner.

In the previous sections, the roles of the social worker and parent are individually highlighted and unpacked. Our research has told us that parent-led advocacy would provide a cohesion between both roles, both complementing the other, encouraging parents to listen to and

engage with social workers and empowering families with knowledge and demystifying the child protection process. Utilising the skills of parents who have already been through the child protection system to educate and support those going through the system could make the process feel "safer"; the parent would feel less isolated and would be more likely to listen to what needs to change in order to protect their children because it's not coming from a professional who has the power to take their children from them.

Parent-led advocacy could then be used as a preventative tool, or a tool to avoid escalation to CP, and potential care proceedings. This would go some way as to redress the power imbalance (prevalent in all local authorities), would free up social workers time to actually do the direct work needed with families, and would be a real and authentic use of the expertise of valuable members of Camden's community.



Camden already benefits from the expertise of the Family Advisory Board (FAB), this project being both innovative and trailblazing! Interviewees endorsed a role for parent advocacy within Camden and said that the FAB would be the ideal starting point.



*"I'm telling you now, hand on my heart, if I had had an advocate, my children would have been home... even if it wasn't an advocate, but maybe an engagement worker. Or if I was given an opportunity to speak with someone who had been through the process to help me understand it." – family member*

*"...often parents who are working with us aren't trusting of us, because they feel that we are only there to take their kids away, and as a result sometimes they need to hear it from a different source, so I think it's really important to look at ensuring that people can get the information about the process and the system from people who have been through it themselves." – professional*



*"I think it would have helped enormously. I think I should have had an advocate; I was a young parent, I was 17, and then I had just turned 18. I should have had an advocate, I should have been given the opportunity to have an advocate.... I think it would have got my voice heard a lot sooner. It would have had a different impact on the situation, because for me, when I look back, it wasn't major. We could have done a transition without a court order. He could have come to live with Dad without a court order." – family member*



“...when we did that training with Annie, the Surviving Safeguarding training, and talking more about peer-to-peer support in that, to me that sounds like one of the most valuable things and I think as social workers we don’t always know about all of the options out there for that.” – professional



“Some parents can’t speak up; some parents struggle to speak up in front of people. Some parents might have great ideas, but they feel afraid, and where there’s fear, sometimes there’s no clarity in your thoughts. So, an advocate could help you - could help ease that fear, so that the parent could talk about some of these things.” – family member



“I think child protection advocates is something that’s a really good idea and that’s something that the lady from the Surviving Safeguarding blog is trying to set up and I think that’s a really important idea, because it’s about whatever can make people understand the process better and try to make the process more cooperative and collaborative in the circumstances, that will help.”  
– professional



“...a working panel of like-minded parents – and [Camden] offering training to birth parents would give a better outcome.” – family member



In an ideal world a Child Protection conference would be ...

- Like a safe kitchen
- An opportunity for the family to lead the plan
- Including advocacy

- More comfortable, make me feel less vulnerable
- Like a Family Group Conference
- Giving more independent advocates for families



# Focus on the Child Protection Conference

*'From the beginning, you're already feeling judged. You feel like you're going in the lion's den. You're sat there around a table with people who have been trained to do certain things but you're not trained. You're going in there thinking, "I don't understand what's going on. What have I done wrong?"*

– ATD Fourth World family member (Gupta et al., 2016)

The interviews and focus groups spoke with a common voice for a change in the way that child protection (hereafter known as CP) conferences were held. Parents used the words “vulnerable” and “uncomfortable” to describe the overriding feelings in a CP conference. We have learned much from families and professionals who took part in our research about how to improve the process of a CP conference.

## Some thought to be given to holding a Family Group Conference (FGC) as standard before a CP conference

Because the nature of an FGC demands that families are placed at the centre and are given space to suggest ways to tackle the issues and concerns, it would be extremely helpful to hold one before a CP conference. It gives the family group a chance to come together and recognise the concerns of the local authority in a safe way, whilst also allowing them the autonomy of putting together their own “care plan”. Taking this action would also mean that families feel more included and invested in the process and “worked with” instead of “done to”.

Theme



*“Although I’m saying I think the two meetings [CP conferences and FGCs] should be combined – until they are...What’s worked really well is when I’ve had one of them – I’ve put that in before the [CP] conference because then we can kind of come armed with the family plan to the conference and then some of the actions of the family plan can be included in the care plan.”*  
– professional



## Reports and assessments need to be given to, and gone through with families in good time before the conferences

“Working Together to Safeguard Children [2018]” state that reports should be given to parents before a CP conference. This was something highlighted within our conversations specifically with professionals as a “must”.

*“I think sharing the report with families far enough ahead of the meeting, so they’ve actually got time to digest it and comment on it is quite important; it doesn’t happen enough.”* – professional



*“...especially reports before conferences – I make sure they’re shared with families in good time, we sit down, and we talk through them. I don’t think it’s a good idea to dump reports on people...”* – professional



*“I think you need to make the time to meet with them beforehand and make sure they’ve got the documentation, and make sure they’re aware of what’s going to be said in the meeting...”* – professional





## The role of the Chair

Broadly, our research found that family's experiences of a CP conference were directly affected by the manner in which the Chair of the conference, or the Independent Reviewing Officer (hereafter known as IRO), approached them. Both family members and professionals said the same thing; the IRO or Chairs role is key.

*"there was one that struck me the most; it was a different Chair, she approached me at the beginning, she had a quick chat with me, allowed me to talk about a few things and give my perspective, and I think that's when it started. Once that Chair gave me that opportunity, that's when I started to become a little bit more vocal in meetings...And I challenged them, and the Chair listened to me." – family member*



*"It's about making sure, before we have the child protection conference; families know that this is a space for them to share as well, and that they can run through beforehand what the really important things they want to say are." – professional*



*"Chairs need to speak more to families to take their opinions into consideration." – family member*



*"good quality Chairs...because to me they are the people who shape the atmosphere and people's input in conferences...so I think having good Chairs is important." – professional*





*“She would meet me before the appointment, for 15 minutes before the time. She gave me time, she listened to me. And when I say something to her, between me and her, she would try to concentrate on that thing”.*

*–family talking about a good chair*

One point that came up during interviews with professionals and family members is that there is a statutory duty on the IRO/Chair to meet with the social worker between CP conferences (or Looked After Children Reviews) to check out how the children’s care plans are going, if any extra support or help is needed, or if the social worker needs to bring the Review meeting, or next meeting forward for whatever reason. However, there is no duty on the IRO/Chair to meet with the family to ask the same question.

This was highlighted a few times during interviews and does form part of our recommendations.



*“I think meeting with parents in between conferences at the midway, to check in – and that could be a telephone call, or an email; it doesn’t have to be a big meeting.” – professionals*

## The “ideal” Child Protection Conference

Multi-agency work is an essential part of the child protection system. Morris et al’s (2018) study with families receiving multiple services found the services that tried to avoid professional silos and worked collectively with the family were appreciated. Those families that had experience of FGCs valued the whole family approach. Throughout our research, reflected in every interview and focus group meeting; was a desire to change the child protection process and that Child Protection Conferences can be better.

One salient point was made by a family member early on:

*“The atmosphere is important”*



This may seem like an obvious statement, but once professionals and families started to break it down, it emerged that many aspect of the CP conference process could change. The little things aren't little!

So, what does the “ideal” CP conference look like to families and professionals in Camden?

## 1. Venue

A number of the research participants mentioned the location of the conference. Currently, it was felt that Child in Need, (CIN) or Team around the Child (TAC), or Early Help meetings – as well as FGCs – were able to be held in the community, family's homes, or another council building (the children's school, for example).

However, when the process moved from voluntary (Section 17), to involuntary (Section 47 – Child Protection), this changed.

One of our recommendations therefore is to bring the venue of CP conferences in line with that of FGCs, CINs and TACs. This would help to reduce fear and anxiety for families and, in doing so, increase the likelihood of engagement within the conference and with services.

*“Being more creative about venues like in the FGCs, the venues are more relaxed for the family, easy to get to. i.e. people's home? Could this be possible? Community spaces...?”*  
– professional



## 2. Before the Conference

Both family members and professionals thought about how a CP conference begins. If a parent, or child has not had that experience before, the process of the conference should, ideally, be explained in easy-to-understand terms. As people learn in different ways, this could also be done visually, as one professional explains here:

*“When speaking to a family that hasn’t been to a child protection conference for example, I’ve got a bit of paper and drawn circles of the different people who will be there to prepare them a little bit for the kind of people that are going to be in the meeting. I’ve done a similar thing with a child and drawn the Chair of the conference as someone with really big ears as someone who listens to all of this information. The idea is they listen, with their big ears, to the views of everyone before making a decision as to what should happen next. Making sure they [the families] have all the information, making sure they have someone to represent them, if they want to.”*

—professional



Many family members felt it to be “intimidating” to walk into a room surrounded by professionals, and this feeling will invariably have an effect on their engagement with the conference itself.





*“I think it would be nice, somehow, for it not to seem so formal. Sitting around a huge table is daunting and seeing people for the first time I think as well, you know, when you’ve got policemen there and all of these other people you’ve not seen before.... even if you could just informally shake hands or say hello or something. Or not necessarily coming in and everyone being seated, and you walk in. Maybe you could be there [first], and they walk in and say hello. Like a little reception or something beforehand. Because then it would make you relax a bit more I think.” – family member*

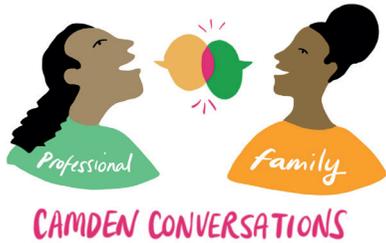
One of our recommendations for discussion therefore is to hold to the idea of “Parents First”; that parents are able to come into the conference room first, before professionals, and choose their seats. This would also be a good time for the IRO to check in with the family before the conference begins. The different multi-agencies could be minded to have only professional attend that have met the parents.

### **3. The little things!**

Many families and professionals felt that the room for the conference itself could be more welcoming.

There were more than a few conversations around hot drinks & safety reasons, but that that in itself created barriers and made families feel unwelcome. Some of our participants talked about simple touches, like a jug of water and cups for everyone on the table, a bowl of fruit and perhaps a central floral display (not necessarily fresh they said!). All of these simple touches would help family members to feel more comfortable, safer, more welcome – and therefore far more likely to contribute to the discussions in a productive way – as well as demonstrating Camden’s trust in and value of families and their participation in these, often daunting conferences.

## Theme



# Acknowledging the system does harm

The system can lead to 'othering' by people from different points in the system, we need to see parents and children as people  
– Featherstone et al, 2014

## CAMDEN CONVERSATIONS

coffee morning workshops



WITH PROFESSIONALS & FAMILIES

Starting a journey to a place of respect, learning and humane practice

Important to acknowledge that the system does harm

We are travelling in hope based on good intentions of individuals within the system

"An appreciative enquiry"

Our participants wanted to acknowledge is that the child protection system (the collective effort of people to protect children) by its very nature can do harm. It is not intentional harm, but it exists nevertheless when the system doesn't work well enough for individuals within it. It can do unintentional harm to children, to parents and wider family networks, to the fabric of our communities – and can do harm to social workers. There is strength in acknowledging that we travel in hope based on the good intentions of people within the system to make things better and minimise harm through good partnership working.

## Minimising harm: the importance of time

Much of this report has been concerned with families, and their feelings and experiences within the child protection system. The main aim of the report was to gather evidence to inform recommendations which could help Camden and its residents.

However, what of the workers? What of the professionals who have given their time freely and passionately to the Enquiry? Social workers come into the profession to try to help people through the course of their lives, whether that be by support or protection. Just as families lives need to be seen in context so do workers' practices. Morris et al. (2018) argue that humane practices thrive best in just and caring organisational cultures. They found that lack of time and timeliness of services was a recurring theme.

The interviews with professionals found social workers reported wanting more time in the day to be able to do the direct work with families. Interviews also showed that workers felt administrative tasks were taking priority over this direct work, and that this was unhelpful for families, and for workers.

This point was made succinctly by a professional below:

**Q:** *What would help you, and other social workers, develop effective relationships with families?*

**A:** *A reduction in administrative accountability!*

*“They’re a maligned people I’m afraid, social workers, and I feel really sorry for the bad rep they get. Kind of “damned if you do, damned if you don’t”.*  
– family member



## Fighting against stigma

In earlier sections of this report discussed experiences of parents that led to feelings of powerless, shame and stigma. It is also important to think about how views about social workers impact on effective relationship-building. A number of professionals and family members noted that social workers are sometimes “up against it” from the start. Whether that be by unhelpful media depiction in soap operas, dramas, or the

shocking tabloid stories we see, it must be acknowledged that social workers are fighting this narrative all of the time. People said that it cannot be overestimated how difficult it is to come into a family at a time of crisis, potentially on an involuntary capacity on the family’s part, and be met with fear and mistrust, whilst at the same time being expected to build a relationship with vulnerable people.

Good supervision was highlighted as important, workers described taking account of their own emotional resilience, supported by their teams. Many felt that the stigma needs to be acknowledged and worked with.



*“I think some social workers find that really difficult, because they come into social work because on some level they want to help, and lots of people because they feel like they’ve got skills in working with vulnerable people – and then what they meet is people saying, “I don’t like you because you’re a social worker.”*  
– professional

*“I think that some families I’ve worked with have had some really strong feelings about social work that comes from partly how social work is depicted in the media. Maybe some families I work with have had some difficult experiences in the past during previous periods of social work involvement, so they still feel really quite strongly about that.”* – professional



## Social workers are people too!

*“Good social work practice starts from your own personal ethics and motivation about why you’re in the job that you are.”*  
– professional



Throughout the research, it was widely acknowledged by both professionals and family members, that to be a successful practitioner takes a certain sort of person. One family member talked about having “all the training in the world”, but if that person “couldn’t work with people, it was pointless!”. Of course, reflective supervision was a key area, but many of our professionals felt a solid value base was the most important.

Professionals said they want to hear more about examples of when they were valued by the families they work with. Perhaps social workers need to feel that families do understand they are under pressure too, and there be recognition of the common experiences between professionals and families when faced with diminishing resources and form alliances for change (Morris et al., 2018). Perhaps we all need to remember that “We are We”.



*“Not everyone can be a social worker, she have to be strong in one way, she have to be strict, but she has to use human [common] sense.”*  
– family member



*“A social work who has a broad base of training and not afraid to challenge, parents, professionals, and their employer is needed.”*  
– family member



*“As human beings, if we’re put under pressure, we become defensive and social workers are no different.”*  
– family member

## Holding in mind the family's previous experiences of intervention and how that caused harm

Our research showed that if, and when, families have had previous experiences with social care, whether positive or negative, this will invariably inform their future interaction with professionals. It goes without saying that if the families have had a good experience, they are very likely to engage and welcome the support offered to them.

Conversely, when parents have had poor experiences of social work, this will impact on their ability to engage meaningfully with the child protection process. That, as a worker, is very difficult to work with, but it is also very difficult to expect families to allow themselves to be vulnerable and ask for help. This needs to be held in the mind of the professional

particularly at the point of meeting the family; that first interaction can make all the difference if a worker can acknowledge the harm that has already been done to this family, by the system, as well as by their own hand.

*“where parents have had children removed from their care in the past, possibly been adopted or looked after by relatives – there’s a significant history and a mistrust of children’s services. That is something you need to work really really hard to get over and we’re not always successful in doing that.” – professional*



*“I mean, in Camden, we use systemic practice which to ensure that you’re taking an appreciative stance, that you’re thinking about the strengths, that it’s not a blaming culture, so that when crises are happening, and children need to be protected, you’re thinking about it as a result of difficulties in relationships, and difficulties in communication, and life events – rather than blaming an individual, or a child, or a parent, or a school and doing a very simplistic hypothesis of why things go wrong. So, you’re trying to get away from any feeling of humiliation or blame, you’re acknowledging the difficulty of the process with families.”  
– professional*



# Recommendations

The study found many themes that are common to other studies of family experiences within the child protection system. Importantly it also highlighted the many shared goals and similar thinking between family members and professionals in Camden and the possibilities for building on this innovative project break down barriers, promote hopeful and helpful conversations that values the expertise of families with experiences of child protection services. Below we make recommendations from the Family-led Enquiry that takes this forward:

## Advocacy

- Helping Hands/FAB group used to develop “Independent Peer Advocacy” offer.
- Independent Peer Advocacy to be offered at the Early Help, Child in Need and Child Protection stages.
- Advocacy to be used as a preventative tool, instead being offered at the end of the process.

## Ongoing role for Family Advisory Board within Camden Model of Social Work

- A review of language used in written reports by FAB – “Jargon Busting”.
- Connecting to the community, FAB to create a survey “What do people think of social work in the Camden’s community and how can we build construct community links?” reaching out to minority groups in particular.



## Family group conference

- Look at relationship between Child Protection conferences and Family Group Conferences with an aim of ensuring an FGC takes place before every CP conference where timescales allow.
- Next steps: Can families come to a Child Protection Conference with a Family Group Conference plan?

## Child protection conference

### Practical:

- Different community venues, more flexible timing.
- Peer FAB member family 'hosts' with a budget to provide visible details to make the process less formal and convey respect and trust in families; for example: flowers/biscuits/hot drinks.

### Structural:

- Chair role and relationship with family important - Chairs meet family beforehand as service standard.
- Family to enter conference room first with Chair. Professionals then come in and introduce themselves.
- Conference to start with family input.
- Peer advocacy support to attend meeting offered for parents.
- Where possible, there should not more than one professional from each agency.
- More time allowed for making plan at the end
- Work done to develop family/community attendance, family in the majority – this would naturally happen if an FGC was to take place before a CP conference.
- Independent Reviewing Officers/Conference Chairs meet with parent between Reviews

## Feedback

- Creative ways to constructively feedback during debrief visit; Peer Advocates to support with this.
- Apps to be used for feedback
- iPad on the wall of the CP conference if parents/family members feel able to feedback immediately after meeting.

## Training and learning

- Multi-disciplinary Camden Conversations Training - formerly "Empowering Families" innovative and successful training programme – but now delivered to multi-agency.
- Regular themed learning exchange workshops (for example: Young Parents, Conflict Resolution, Engaging Fathers etc).
- Gender informed practice, trying to understand complex relationships in situations of domestic violence.
- Social workers to consider ways to acknowledge power.
- Look at opportunities for everyone in the system to critically reflect on the harm it can do, and ways of minimising this.
- Talk explicitly about how social work is perceived in communities, how to break down stigma and build links, and tackle the lack of understanding about social work in society at large.



## Sharing the stories of good practice

- Regular good practice sharing in the form of reflective case discussions, monthly newsletters via email
- Celebrating successes for families and for social workers and sharing these; anonymously if required.

## Pledge / Promise - what the Camden model of social work delivers for families

- Use of self; understanding that social workers, parents and children share complex emotional lives.
- Post child removal support and trauma help
- An audit of Camden practice be able to show where they are taking a capability/strengths approach.
- Relational approach to working together, for example: photos on profiles. A “human approach to humanise a system which is set up for people helping people”.
- Demonstrate effective process for open records for people to see their files - review timescales and process.
- Promote practice that incorporates an understanding of the social, economic and culture context of families’ lives, the challenges many face living in poverty, and the importance practical and emotional support.



Testing Advocacy



Peer Support



Learning Exchanges



Parent led workshops

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# Appendix A

## A Family-led Enquiry into Child Protection Processes in Camden

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FAMILIES

Briefly explain the project and that we are asking for views on improving the child protection system and they do not need to share any personal details that they do not feel comfortable with.

Ask if they have any questions and check that they consent to the interview/ focus group.

You may not need to ask all the questions as some may have been covered in earlier responses

Ask if they could sign the consent form

Brief details:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Relationship to the child/ren:

### Questions

#### Role of the social worker

- What did you expect from your social worker and their role? Were these expectations met?
- What could the social worker have done to make sure you understood their role and the process?
- Did you experience any difficulties with social workers– if so what were they and what could have been done differently?
- Did you have any positive experiences of social workers – if so what were they?
- What did social workers do to make you feel this was a positive experience?
- How would you describe good social work practice?
- What would make you feel it would be helpful to have a social worker around?
- What do you think helps good relationships between social workers and family members?
- What makes this more difficult?

#### The child protection process

- Did you understand the child protection process and the reasons for the involvement of Children's Services? Can you say why you feel like this?
- How could have helped you understand what was going on better?

- Did anyone explain your rights within the law relating to child protection procedures?
- Were you able to express your views before and during the child protection conferences/ other meetings? Did you feel listened to?
- Would it have helped you to have an advocate/ support person prior to and during meetings or CP conferences? How could they have helped?
- What would have helped you to be more involved in the process (e.g. child protection conferences)?
- What would you have helped you negotiate the process?
- What improvements would you suggest to the child protection process?

#### Support services

- What services did you want and request to help you and your family?
- What services were offered to help you and your family – practical and emotional? Did you feel you had choice in accepting these?
- How helpful were these services? If helpful, what made them so? If unhelpful, what could have been different?
- What additional services do you think could have helped you and your family?
- What key recommend?

## Appendix B

### A Family-led Enquiry into Child Protection Processes in Camden

#### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Briefly explain the project and that we are asking for views on improving the child protection system.

Ask if they have any questions and check that they consent to the interview/ focus group.

You may not need to ask all the questions as some may have been covered in earlier responses

Ask if they could sign the consent form

Brief details:

Gender:

Ethnicity:

Role / team:

#### Questions

##### Relationships with families

- What are the challenges that you/social workers face developing relationships with families involved in the child protection system?
- Can you think of a family you worked well with? What was it that you did that helped that relationship?
- What would help you and other social workers develop effective relationships with families?
- How do you prepare to introduce yourself and your role to parents?
- How do you take into account individual families' circumstances when working with families – e.g. learning disability, cultural issues?
- Are there any differences when working with young parents?
- How do you ensure you engage with fathers? Is there more that you and others could do?
- Do you give families the opportunities to question information held about them in a non-confrontational way?
- How would you describe good social work practice? What helps/ hinders this?

##### Family engagement in the child protection process

- How do you ensure parents and other family

members understand the child protection process and their rights? Can you give examples

- Do you provide information on advocates/ child care solicitors? If not what are the barriers to providing these details?
- How do you prepare families for meetings, such as child protection conferences? Could this be done differently and if so how?
- How do you and other professionals ensure that family's voices are heard in meetings and developing care plans? Could this be done differently and if so how?
- What improvements, if any, would you suggest to the child protection process to help engagement with families?
- How do you enable families to give feedback on the child protection system? Can you think of other ways to do this that could be helpful?

##### Support services

- What are the main services available to help families involved in the child protection system – practical and emotional?
- Can you give examples of how these services have helped?
- What are some of the gaps in services available to help families involved in the child protection system?
- What key recommendations would you suggest to improve Camden's child protection system?

# Appendix C

## Trigger Questions

A relationship works well when...

I understand and respond better when

My thinking is stopped by...

I was helped when someone...

The thing that makes me angry is...

I think advocacy is...

Sometimes I wish...

I had success the other day when...

Non-confrontational means...

I think I am...

Most people think I am...

They saw me as an effective because....

Children need...

Recently I ensured a family's voice was heard...

A parent engaged well recently when...

A child protection conference makes me feel...

In an ideal world a Child Protection conference would be like

Recently a child protection conference felt good because...

I responded to feedback by...

Technology can help me

What helps me think

Rights are important because...

Fathers need...

A good social services experience would mean...

Camden child protection can change by...



# CAMDEN CONVERSATIONS

## OUR FAMILY-LED CHILD PROTECTION ENQUIRY



### What we hoped to achieve:

Camden child protection can change by being human

In an ideal world child protection conferences would be a conversation instead of a meeting



PROFESSIONAL



FAMILY MEMBER

constructive dialogue

### Backstory: 2014

Family Advisory Board in Camden is formed of local experts by experience

2016: creation of the



Co-designed and delivered by Annie from Surviving Safeguarding

### HOW CAMDEN CONVERSATIONS HAPPENED:

Parents are finding the Child Protection process very difficult

I feel vulnerable and uncomfortable in child protection conferences



PARENTS

RESEARCH  
Child Protection conferences are hard and quite official. They can feel very 'blaming'

Let's try to find out more - to help families take care of their children



Let's use Camden Conversations to start a participatory research project

A PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH PROJECT IS BORN

### The TEAM



Annie from Surviving Safeguarding



Family Advisory Board supported by social worker Tim Fisher



Professor Anna Gupta

### CAMDEN CONVERSATIONS

coffee morning workshops



WITH PROFESSIONALS & FAMILIES

Starting a journey to a place of respect, learning and humane practice

Important to acknowledge that the system does harm

We are travelling in hope based on good intentions of individuals within the system

"An appreciative enquiry"

### Who & what is involved?

50 people 25 families 25 professionals



People from all points in the child protection system

One to one interviews & listening circles

all led by parents

These all took place between September 2017 and September 2018 at OUR SPACES



I never thought I would be back in this office sitting down, leading this conversation.

PARENT FEEDBACK

### SESSION FEEDBACK

families  
It was **abuzz** asking the questions, I felt like I learnt and they learnt

I am **excited** to hear the outcome and recommendations of the enquiry, for me this process has already been a **SUCCESS** which has developed me as a practitioner

Professionals



Changing culture

Testing Advocacy Peer Support

Learning Exchanges Parent led workshops



We are already innovating!

### HEADLINE AREAS FOR ACTION

- ADVOCACY PEER SUPPORT
- LEARNING EXCHANGE DEMONSTRATING FAMILY VOICES CAN LEAD TO CHANGE
- CP FORMAT & 'ATMOSPHERE'
- SUPPORT, INFORMATION AND OPPORTUNITY FOR PARENTS TO FEED BACK

Where could this journey take us?



MORE HUMANE, A CONVERSATION

IN AN IDEAL WORLD...

A CHANGE IN ATMOSPHERE