social work
inspection agency

Practice Guide

Chronologies

Improving Practice in Scotland

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A guide to chronologies

Contents

Introduction

'Chronologies have become one of the most talked about and least understood tools in modern social work practice.'

This guide seeks to unravel this paradox and to draw on practitioner experience to explore what chronologies are, their uses and limitations.

We use the term chronologies in the plural as we believe that one size does not fit all and that there are various models and requirements of a chronology depending on the purpose.

Chronologies are most often thought of in the context of work with children and young people, but they may have equal relevance in work with adults, and in criminal and youth justice. In the preparation of this guide we consulted colleagues in all aspects of social work practice and reflect their views on the value of chronologies (Appendix 1).

We recognise the complex relationship between assessment and chronology, and this is not a 'how to assess' guide but a recognition of the role of chronologies as part of assessment.

Our partners in the preparation of this guide have provided us with practice examples. Any identifying details have been changed to preserve the anonymity of the people concerned and we have used pseudonyms. Other examples have been drawn from published reports from throughout the UK.

1 What is a chronology?

In our work with councils and other organisations we have often been asked for a working definition of a chronology and what one should look like.

There are many definitions of a chronology for example:

'A list in date order of all the major changes and events in a person's life.'

'A chronology seeks to provide a clear account of all significant events in a child's life to date, drawing upon the knowledge and information held by agencies involved with the child and family.'

'The purpose of a chronology is early indications of emerging patterns of concern.'

(For a summary of SWIA's work with councils and other agencies see Appendix 2.)

Rather than seeking a single definition, we discuss different forms of chronology which have relevance to a range of people who use services.

We distinguish between single agency and multi-agency chronologies and those concerned with assessment and risk management and reviews of previous historic events for example significant case reviews. We heard differing views about whether there should be a 'family chronology' or one for each child in the family, or both.

Why are chronologies useful to practitioners and managers? 2

There have been a number of influences on social work practice in the past twenty years. One of the main drivers has been the concept of 'risk'. This guide is not about risk assessment and management but about an important aspect of that process. Therefore risk as a concept is not explored in depth. There are many definitions which are debated, for example Carson and Bain (2008).

Social work assessment has always been concerned to consider past events and their relevance to a person or families' current situation. Past life events are found in most of the indicators of risk which have been produced.

Risk taking in health and welfare settings does not take place in a vacuum; it is best understood within the context of the rights and responsibilities of vulnerable people, their carers and the rest of society.

There are limitations in any risk assessment but an accurate chronology can assist the process of assessment and review. A chronology is not an assessment, nor is it an end in itself. It is a tool which professionals in a range of disciplines can use to help them to understand what is happening in the life of a child or adult.

Recent inquiries into the care of children, adults at risk, and people who commit serious crimes (Appendix 4), have all concluded that a chronology could have helped towards an earlier identification of risks to the person, or risks from them.

In a wider context, *Changing Lives* (2006) recognised three dimensions to the role of social work services.

- *supporting the most vulnerable and excluded members of our society to live fulfilling lives, working in partnership with individuals, families and communities and with other public, voluntary and private services;*

- *protecting individuals, families and communities at risk of harm from themselves or others through the use of statutory powers, then working to reduce and minimise that risk through helping people to change their behaviours;*

- *working with others to close the opportunity gap between the richest and poorest in our society, through helping individuals and families to take control of their lives, and develop hope and aspirations for the future.*

In child care, *Getting it right for every child* is a national programme that aims to improve outcomes for all children and young people in Scotland. It seeks to do this by providing a framework for all services and agencies working with children and families to deliver a co-ordinated approach which is appropriate, proportionate and timely. The development implementation plan for *Getting it right* was published in June 2006. It outlined a strategy for streamlining children's records, assessments and action plans; the development of national practice tools, training materials and guidance; pilot testing of a prototype electronic solution to facilitate information sharing across children's services; and a communication strategy. In addition, two pathfinder projects were established to help shape, develop and test the practice tools and training materials and to inform the development of national guidance for *Getting it right.* http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/childrensservices/girfec/programme-overview

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2.1 Examples of inquiries which have promoted the importance of chronologies

> *'Vale of Glamorgan Council's social services director today apologised for "fundamental flaws" in practice which led to a teenage sex offender being placed in a home with two young children, whom he then abused.*
>
> *The report (2009) found that the placement service was not provided with a chronology of previous incidents involving the man or the findings of assessments made regarding the risk he may pose to others.'*

Lord Laming noted the importance of a chronology in child protection in both the inquiries into the deaths of Victoria Climbié (2004) and baby Peter (2008).

The report into the care and protection of children in Eilean Siar (2005) recommended that:

> *'All of the agencies involved in protecting children must gather the information they have on individual children at risk into a chronology of key events and contacts, review it regularly and make sure that it is passed on to the professional with the lead role in protecting the child. The professional with lead role must co-ordinate this into a multi-agency chronology on a regular basis.'*

In a youth justice context the follow up inspection into the management of Colyn Evans (2009) concluded that:

> 'SWIA did not find comprehensive and up-to-date chronologies in any of the files in the sample. Good risk assessment requires detailed and accurate information. For example, the young person referred to in the previous paragraph had assaulted staff in a residential unit on several occasions, and had a long history of abusive behaviour which could have been identified by an accurate chronology.'

We explore nine core aspects of a chronology which should:

- **be a useful tool in assessment and practice**
- **not an assessment – but part of assessment**
- **not an end in itself – a working tool which promotes engagement with people who use services**
- **be accurate – rely on good, up-to-date case recording**
- **contain sufficient detail but not substitute for recording in the file**
- **be flexible – detail collected may be increased if risk increases**
- **be reviewed and analysed – a chronology which is not reviewed regularly is of limited relevance**
- **recognise that different constructions of a chronology are needed for different reasons e.g. current work and examining historical events**
- **recognise that single agency and multi-agency chronologies set different demands and expectations**
- **record what was done at the time. Many chronologies list events, dates etc. but do not have a column which sets out the action which was taken at the time. This column should also include a note when there was no action.**

The chronology as a tool in assessment and practice

3

Many practitioners have asked *'do we need chronologies for every person we are working with?'.* This decision depends on the assessment of the person and their circumstances.

In summary there are five key elements to compiling all chronologies.

3.1 Compiling a chronology

- Deciding on the purpose of compiling a chronology in the context of the assessment of the child or adult – using professional judgement
- Identifying the key events to be recorded
- Making sure that what is recorded is accurate and in date order
- Recording facts, events in the person's life
- Taking account of the perspective of the child or adult at the centre of the significance of events for them

There are wide variations between different guidance on what to include in a chronology and we discuss this in detail later, but as a starter core elements include:

3.2 Core elements of a chronology

- Key dates of birth, life events, moves
- Facts e.g. child's name placed on the child protection register, MAPPA meeting, adult who is subject to adult protection procedures
- Transitions, life changes
- Key professional interventions e.g. reviews, hearings, tribunals, prison sentences
- Not opinion – these may be for the record but the strength of chronologies lies in their reporting of facts/times/dates
- A very brief note of an event e.g. a fall down stairs, coming to school with a bruise, a registered sex offender whose car keeps breaking down outside a primary school
- The actions which were taken. Many chronologies list events and dates but do not have a column which enables actions taken, or not taken to be recorded

After these core elements there will be variations depending on the purpose of the chronology.

A chronology is not an assessment – but part of assessment

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A chronology is not an assessment, it is informed by, and is part of, an assessment.

> *'Gathering together large amounts of information is not an assessment. Sharing it does not constitute a child protection plan. Professionals must take the next step to state why they attach significance to some issues and not to others.'*
> *(Eilean Siar report 2005, paragraph 20)*

Chronologies are one key part of assessing and managing risk.

> *'It is important to note that what might be a key event in one child's life, such as period of good health or good school attendance after a long period of absence or exclusion, will not even be relevant to another child. In this respect agencies are asked to use their professional judgement in completing the chronologies.'* (GIRFEC Ayrshire 2007)

4.1 A practice example
James aged 7

- -

James is 7 and attends school regularly. Until recently he has been a happy child who enjoys reading and football. James is on supervision and his school keep in regular contact with his social worker. His mother is on a methadone programme and she has been making good progress. She has started work two afternoons a week in the local supermarket and James is collected by his maternal grandfather on these days.

James has good health but recently has been sick after lunch. His mother told her social worker that she was surprised when James screamed and refused to go for a check up at the dentists as he has always been good in the past. He has wet his bed on some nights.

James' social worker wonders if James is unsettled by his mother working as he worried before about her when she was using heroin. At a meeting at the school the social worker asks James' teacher to keep notes of his behaviour and when he is being sick. She asks James' mother to keep a note of which days he wets the bed. She asks his grandfather if he has seen any changes in James' behaviour. He is quite dismissive of her enquiries and blames his daughter for giving James too many sweets.

After a month the social worker puts all the data into a chronology and discusses it with her senior in supervision. They notice that James is only sick on the days when he is collected by his grandfather and wets his bed usually on the same night. They do not jump to conclusions but look out the previous case files on James' mother and find a record of an allegation when she was 15 that she was being sexually abused by her father. There was no evidence and she was not believed at that time.

The findings of the chronology have contributed to their revised assessment of what may be distressing James and they develop a plan to seek more information.

A chronology is not an end in itself but a working tool which promotes engagement with people who use services

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In the example above if the social worker had simply gathered the information, and not analysed it, the chronology would have had no purpose and James might have remained unprotected. We heard from some practitioners that they felt compiling a chronology was an exercise which took up considerable time but did not lead anywhere.

Chronologies have a wider role than with risk assessment and management. A chronology can be a valuable tool for planning and supervision. When staff are very busy and pressed, progress in working with a person may drift. Several months can pass without any action and this is not always easy to identify from a record. A chronology of dates can help to flag up delay and drift.

5.1 A Practice example
Michael aged 18

Michael has learning disabilities and restricted mobility. He left a specialist residential placement when he was 16 and has been at home ever since. An assessment was undertaken identifying his needs but the social worker left and duty workers have been in occasional contact with Michael. His mother finds it hard to care for him full time and she has increasingly severe attacks of angina. Michael used to go to a respite family for long weekends once a month when he was younger but that ceased when he was 17.

When Michael's mother is taken into hospital her sister contacts the duty social worker who reviews the record and decides to compile a chronology of Michael's history picking out his placements, respite care dates and outcomes, or lack of them. This is presented at a joint meeting between social work and health staff and the delays and length of time Michael has been waiting become quite clear.

Chronologies are a part of recording and should be available to the person they are about, unless there are justifiable legal reasons concerned with risk. The chronology should be shown to and discussed with the person it is about, or their parent if they are a child. Accuracy is a vital element of a chronology and mistakes, particularly concerning dates of birth, dates when families moved home etc. can creep into records and then be replicated over and over in reports.

Sharing chronologies and consulting people who use services is not solely to check accuracy but can be part of working together. Reviewing a chronology together with a person who uses services can help to identify where they have succeeded, for example in reducing their drug dependency and improving the school attendance of their child.

In our discussion with practitioners we found differing views on where key information about a child or adult should be located. Electronic file systems vary but all should have the equivalent of a file front sheet with essential information about contacts, professionals, health staff etc. This is not the task of the chronology.

A chronology must be based on up-to-date, accurate case recording

6

The contents of a chronology are linked to the assessment and also contribute to the assessment and may change as knowledge or identification of risk changes.

The importance of accurate recording has been a long running finding of child protection inquiries since the mid-1970s.

One of the first major child protection inquiries into the death of Maria Colwell noted that:

'Inaccuracies and deficiencies in the recording of visits and telephone messages played a part in the tragedy… the importance of recording actual dates and distinguishing between fact and impression.'

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Other inquiries found that allegations by neighbours were sometimes not recorded fully, were ignored or deemed to be malicious e.g. inquiries into the deaths of Lucy Gates (1982) Heidi Koseda (1986).

All eight child protection inquiries concluded between 1974 and 1981 reported that records were incomplete. Many years later, poor recording was noted in Lord Laming's inquiries into the deaths of Victoria Climbié (2004) and baby Peter (2008).

The Western Isles inspection (2005) found that recording by social workers had been thorough and detailed. However events had been treated in isolation rather than put together to form a pattern and this led to the recommendation in the report on the importance of chronologies.

Children's Reporters who have contributed to this guide indentified accurate recording of events and incidents as important for them

when compiling grounds of referral. They are looking for specification and relevance. Specific incidents or concerns in isolation can be relevant. However, to gain a coherent view of the child's situation, patterns of incidents, injuries or concerns together with accurate dates and times are important.

We do not discuss recording further here as SWIA has published a separate guide on this topic; *On the record – getting it right (2010)*. However, a chronology is not a substitute for good recording and a good chronology relies on good recording.

6.1 A practice example
Mrs Anderson aged 82

Mrs Anderson is 82. She has arthritis and a heart condition which sometimes causes her to feel dizzy. She lives alone and her daughter visits occasionally. Her daughter is known to the criminal justice team and is on probation for alcohol-related violence.

Mrs Anderson has a home care worker twice a week on Tuesdays and Fridays. Her worker has noticed that Mrs Anderson has bruises on her face which she accounts for by having fallen when dizzy. She also told her worker that she seems to be losing her electricity money which she keeps in a china dog on the mantelpiece. The home care worker tells her manager who asks her to keep a note of these events and also checks with Mrs Anderson's GP

who is surprised as he did not think her dizziness was serious enough to cause persistent falls, nor that she would necessarily be forgetful about money.

At the next care management review of Mrs Anderson, the very detailed notes made by the home care worker are considered. She noted not only the dates of Mrs Anderson's bruises and falls but also the days of the week. Mrs Anderson invariably 'falls' on Sunday evenings on the second and fourth Sundays of the month. A phone call to the criminal justice worker discovers that Mrs Andersons' daughter stays with her on these weekends. Adult Protection Procedures are put in place.

A chronology should contain sufficient detail but not substitute for recording in the file

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Practitioners told us that this was one of the most complex areas. Some commented that chronologies had become repeats of the file, they were arduous to compile and, once completed, were so detailed workers could not 'see the wood for the trees'.

In the two practice examples discussed above if the workers had recorded excessive details it would have been more difficult for them to pinpoint what might have been important issues. Particularly if staff are worried about a child or adult who may be at risk, the temptation is to record everything in their lives in the chronology as well as the record.

Our consultations with practitioner forums told us that there were differing views about the key areas within a chronology and that there was not widespread agreement amongst practitioners. For example we were told:

> 'There are great debates and disagreements over key areas. Some people wanted more detail than others. Some wanted just facts i.e. where born etc. Some felt that key areas are ones that involve only the family member so you would enter the fact that they attended the CPCC but not the issues brought to the CPCC. These could be viewed through the fuller file.'

For example when we consulted staff in the voluntary sector they raised the issue of sharing and contributing to chronologies.

> 'Another key issue was if you did not see the child for a visit do you put that in the chronology?'

Chronologies are not a substitute for effective recording so a worker who visited and did not see the child would record that in the file. If there were serious concerns about the child, action would

be taken to see the child or inform the lead agency. A chronology is not a practice tool to manage day-to-day work. When the chronology was being compiled what would be significant would be how many visits occurred without seeing the child and whether that formed part of a pattern of avoidance by the family.

A chronology should be flexible – detail collected may be increased if risk increases

8

Chronologies are working tools, not an end in themselves. The needs of the assessment will influence the type of chronology. The means of collecting detail for chronologies has been debated and some practitioners were using electronic approaches to compiling them. Some welcomed this approach as labour saving whilst others felt it would lead to a standardised approach which would not take account of the importance of professional judgment about what to include.

For example, where there is a high risk for a child living at home, the chronology may include school attendance and specific details e.g. was the child dressed appropriately, did they bring a packed lunch? The chronology may include whether the child was collected from school on time and by whom.

The inspection into the care and protection of children in Eilean Siar (2005) found that:

> *'When Alice started school in England in 1994 her class teachers kept a detailed daily record of her behaviour, progress and any marks, bruises or injuries she arrived at school with, or sustained in school. In Eilean Siar Barbara's special class teacher kept a diary of any issues which worried her about Barbara's behaviour, health or any marks, bruises or injuries from the day she started school. At times, the teacher reported these to the head teacher who then informed social work department staff. In September 1998 Caitlin's class teacher began to keep a similar diary, which included a detailed record of incidents of soiling and wetting and reported some of these to the head teacher.'*

The inspection identified that this material should have been put together and regularly reviewed.

9 The importance of review and analysis – a chronology which is not reviewed regularly is of limited relevance

Review and analysis of a chronology are essential to an effective assessment. A chronology which is not reviewed and analysed serves little if any purpose. There are a range of opportunities to review a chronology. When we consulted colleagues in SCRA we heard about the value of chronologies to the Hearing. Panel members as well as reading reports found value in a good chronology to give them a picture of the child's life, transitions and professional interventions.

Our case examples above have illustrated the role of supervision in reviewing a chronology. Some practitioners told us about peer reviews where staff reviewed chronologies each had written and considered patterns, timescales and risks which could be identified.

In some areas of criminal justice, practitioners are considering the increasing use of chronologies. In our consultations with workers and with representatives from the police we heard of the value of chronologies to the assessment and oversight of people whose circumstances are complex and who constitute a high risk to themselves and/or others.

9.1 A practice example
Malcolm aged 43 – who is on licence and on the sex offenders register

Malcolm is on licence after serving a six year sentence for abusing children. He completed all the programmes when he was in prison and is presenting himself as a changed man. He is a mechanic and has found a job in a small garage near his home. Malcolm's supervising officer reviews his previous offending and identifies a pattern of him seeming to settle down and take no further interest in children, but then beginning to slowly increase his interest.

Malcolm's movements in his car were monitored; he used it as part of his work to collect spare parts.

The janitor at the local primary school mentioned to the local police that Malcolm's car recently broke down as he was passing the school. The children were not out playing and he got it going after half an hour. The following week his car had a flat tyre whilst the children were on lunch break and a few days later the alternator failed just across the road as the children were going home from school. Malcolm did not approach the children. However, his supervisor was alerted and he suspected a pattern in Malcolm's behaviour which appeared again to be a risk to children.

10 Different types of chronology are needed for different reasons e.g. current work and examining historical events

So far we have discussed chronologies which are part of current work with children and adults. However reviews, significant case reviews and inquiries have all compiled chronologies to help them to make sense of what has happened. These will rely on retrospective information and may require the records of several agencies to be brought together into a single chronology. The choice of data may change as a tentative hypothesis is developed and explored.

Some staff suggested that examples of good practice should also be reviewed in depth to identify strengths and what worked well.

Single agency and multi-agency chronologies set different demands and expectations

11

'Practice and research has shown that integrated chronologies can be extremely important in identifying critical events in the lives of children and can assist professionals in decision making when working together with vulnerable children and families.' (Ayrshire – Practice Notes 2)

The Scottish Government Joint Improvement Team guidance on improving adult protection plans (2007) recommended that a chronology should be part of adult protection and risk assessment protection planning. Phase two of the Shared Learning Initiative aimed at improving the protection of adults at risk.

When we consulted ACPOS they recognised a key role for multi-agency chronologies in the management of sex offenders.

Complications can arise between professionals if it is not clear exactly who has responsibility for gathering together single agency chronologies, combining them into one and updating this chronology regularly. Multi-agency chronologies must also be regularly reviewed, analysed and updated by the lead professional.

'The lead professional is responsible for collating the integrated chronology and all agencies contributing to the integrated assessment are expected to contribute to it. The process will work best when there is a shared sense of responsibility by all for gathering, recording and passing the information to the lead professional...'

12 SWIA experience

All SWIA performance inspections have considered council approaches to risk assessment. We found in our file reading that children whose names were on the child protection register had the most comprehensive risk assessments, although, overall, only 57% of the files which we read contained chronologies. Staff were paying increasing attention to developing single and multi-agency chronologies, the latter in partnership with education, health and other agencies.

Our analysis indicated that there was a positive association between chronologies and the quality of assessments. This is encouraging although we found that children with disabilities had the least good assessments and the lowest numbers (25%) of files which contained a chronology. Given the evidence from many studies that disabled children can be significantly more vulnerable to abuse, this is an area for improvement (Appendix 4).

Chronologies have an important role in providing data to examine patterns and indentify actual or potential risks. Supervision provides an opportunity to review the role of the worker and to plan responses.

The importance of a coherent approach to risk assessment has been recognised in child protection research and inquiries. A 'pick and mix' approach suggested by a folder of different tools is unhelpful. New approaches are being developed in councils as part of the rolling out of GIRFEC. We have so far found that the introduction of the Integrated Assessment Framework is taking time

and there were variations between councils on progress. However we were encouraged by one council which:

'In line with national guidance, was working towards the integrated assessment framework becoming the main working tool for children and families services. The IAF provided a means by which all services for children, universal and specialist, could gather and share information, assess needs, plan and coordinate services for individual children. It included a chronology and could be used for hearing reports, reviews of looked after children and child protection case conferences.'

Conclusion

This guide has drawn on the experience of different agencies to explore the nature of chronologies, their uses and limitations. In our performance inspections we have reviewed the role of chronologies in the context of risk assessment and risk management with increasingly positive findings.

Staff in many agencies are recognising the value of chronologies. New approaches to recording and assessment in work with both adults and children and their families create opportunities to develop the use of chronologies. However, there are also risks that a mechanical approach which automatically records predetermined 'key facts' could weaken the focus and role of professional judgment which are vital to effective practice. A chronology must never become and end in itself.

Chronologies, as part of a skilled and focussed approach, can be an essential tool in caring for and protecting children and adults by:

- bringing together issues identified by different agencies and presenting them coherently
- contributing precise data which can help practitioners to identify patterns of behaviour which will contribute to an assessment
- recognising that a chronology is relevant in criminal justice work for assessing and managing people who constitute a high risk to themselves and/or others
- using their findings as an integral part of supervision and peer review
- strengthening the partnership between practitioners and people who use services.

Appendix 1

Chronology guide

Consultation – before compiling the first draft we asked for views on the following:

1. What key areas should be included?

2. Should the approach in adult and children's services be similar?

3. If not what are the key aspects of different approaches?

4. Are there any issues about electronic files which are helpful or unhelpful in compiling chronologies?

5. How should a chronology be reviewed e.g. by a peer, a manager or both?

6. Do you have any feedback from reporters about their views on chronologies for reports?

7. What are the key issues which have come up for you in practice e.g. time to complete, updating, how far back should they go?

The draft was circulated with the following request:

This draft guide has been sent to you for your comments. We would appreciate your views on any aspect but specific comments on the following would help us in preparing the final version.

1. Do the ten key themes work? Are they relevant, should any others be added?

2. Are the headings in the right order?

3. Comments on the case examples –

> *James*
> *Michael*
> *Mrs Anderson*
> *Malcolm*

4. Would short examples of actual anonymised chronologies in an appendix be useful?

5. Any other comments.

Appendix 2

Chronology guide

The role of SWIA

The Social Work Inspection Agency (SWIA) was set up as an independent executive agency by Scottish Ministers in April 2005. This was in direct response to Ministers' concerns both to protect some of the most vulnerable people in our society who use social work and social care services and to drive up standards in delivering social service across Scotland. Prior to the establishment of SWIA in 2005 there was no ongoing inspection of local authority social work services.

By 2009 SWIA had completed a review of all 32 local authority social work services; the final performance inspection report was published in September 2009. The report on SWIA's Performance Inspection Programme 2005-2009 provides an overview and high level synthesis giving a unique insight into social work services in Scotland. SWIA has also completed criminal justice inspections, multi-agency inspections and special inspections.

We also work with other inspectorates (QIS, HMIE etc) to produce single service inspection reports e.g. in 2006/7 we led multi-agency inspections on:

- services for people with learning disabilities
- services for older people and
- services for people with substance misuse problems.

We worked jointly with the Care Commission and HMIE in examining the care and education of young people at Geisland School. Similar inspections were subsequently carried out at three other independent residential schools providing services for young

people who display sexually harmful behaviours (Kibble Education and Care Centre, St Mary's Kenmure Secure Unit and Oakbank School).

The overview report of those four inspections (2007) included additional work undertaken by SWIA with the councils who commissioned the places for the young people.

In addition we have been asked to undertake a number of specific investigations where there was evidence of serious harm to service users:

- An inspection into the care and protection of children in Eilean Siar (2005)
- An investigation into the management of the post-release supervision of a sex offender in North Lanarkshire (2005)
- A review of the management arrangements of Colyn Evans by Fife Council and Fife Constabulary (2005)
- 'No fears so long as we work together' follow up Joint Inspection of Scottish Borders Council and NHS Borders, SWIA and Mental Welfare Commission (2005).

SWIA's published performance inspections of local authority services look at a wide range of services for people within a local authority from a number of perspectives. We include statistical and local authority reporting, file reading, interviews with staff at all levels in the authority, service users, their carers and key stakeholders in other agencies e.g. the police, health and Children's Reporters.

In January 2009 SWIA published a 'guide to supported self evaluation'. SWIA created this guide in partnership with colleagues in *Changing Lives* and through working closely local authorities who volunteered to take part. SWIA has also published several detailed 'good practice self-evaluation guides' to complement the general guide.

Appendix 3

Example from Lambeth Council

With thanks to the London Borough of Lambeth for permission to reproduce this account.

Chronology guide

Introducing chronologies in a large urban local authority.

Extract from Lambeth Council website.

'Case chronologies safeguard children and are now a fact of life for local authority children and families services. While at first they can be viewed as an added burden to social workers, chronologies are proving an essential tool in caring for vulnerable children.

It is thought by many that those who fail to understand the past cannot plan for the future, and are condemned to repeat their mistakes.

The failure to grasp patterns in a child's history was one of the key themes running through the Laming report into the death of Victoria Climbié'.

One of the report's recommendations – just two short lines – had huge implications for many children and families services. Within six months of the publication of the report, directors of social services had to ensure every child's case file had, on the inside of the front cover, a "properly maintained chronology". Put simply, this is a record of significant events in the child's life – Especially their relations with social services such as interventions, support given to the child or their family, decisions made on risk and other life events.

There was universal agreement these chronologies would help to assess risk, identify patterns of behaviour and ensure safer practices for looked-after children.

But how do you begin to put this requirement into practice in a borough such as Lambeth, the largest in inner London? There are nearly 1,500 child cases open at any one time, while referral and assessment teams carry out large numbers of initial assessments every day. Capacity seemed a major issue.

However, as we have worked through the process it is becoming clear that initial work on chronologies is helping us to save time and effort – And to deliver a better service. In Lambeth our looked-after children teams ran a pilot project in 2002 ensuring looked-after young people had a proper case history when they left the care of Lambeth. During the life of the project, the Laming report was published and we took on board the recommendations and began expanding our pilot.

The time-consuming work of going through files paid off almost immediately. The chronologies were used in looked-after reviews. They helped to inform specialist resources when they were needed. And they helped us to understand placement breakdowns. For example, last year a young man in our care made a suicide attempt. We were able to give the child and adolescent mental health unit his history straight away, helping the staff there to understand what had happened and make plans for his treatment.

On 3 November last year, the judicial protocol for care proceedings was introduced. This requires court proceedings to be "front loaded" with key documentation. We have ensured our method of preparing chronologies has been adjusted to meet the standard for the judicial protocol and are now asking our staff to prepare chronologies on incoming cases, with the knowledge they could be required for court. If that time comes, we are ready; if it doesn't, we have a document that is a working tool for child protection conferences, core assessments, external referrals or therapeutic work.

We have been working with our IT section to come up with a more effective record-keeping process. A shared database is now being built to store and update the chronologies. We will be able to search the system to see whether a chronology contains, for example, a child protection or court component.

Some people still wonder what goes in and what stays out of a chronology. What we are saying to practitioners in Lambeth is to follow the judicial protocol requirement to confine the entries to what is significant in a child's life and to avoid duplicating what is already there in case recording. Getting to grips with historical chronologies going back generations still causes some of us sleepless nights, but at least all new cases coming in now have a chronology started as a matter of routine.

Lambeth is moving in the right direction as regards those two short lines making up recommendation 58 of the Laming report – but, more importantly, the chronology and its use as a working tool is rising steadily up the agenda for improving our practice.'

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Appendix 4

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