

Frequently Asked Questions

1. What is Signs of Safety?

‘Signs of Safety’ is an innovative, strengths-based approach to working with children, young people and families. It is now widely recognised internationally as the **leading approach to child protection casework**.

Signs of Safety provides a clear framework for **how** to build relationships with families and work effectively with them to achieve better outcomes for children and young people. It was developed in Western Australia in the 1990s by Andrew Turnell and Steve Edwards. Andrew and Steve worked with over 150 frontline practitioners to develop and hone the approach, so it is based on **what practitioners know works well in real life cases**. It is now being used across the world.

It includes:

- **principles for practice** which underpin the work.
- **ways of working** – what to do, how and when.
- **a range of tools** to support engagement with families, strong assessments and plans, and for capturing the voice of the child or young person.
- **ways to support learning, reflection and development**, such as supervision and audit of practice that are aligned with the approach.

Research has shown that the best outcomes for children and young people are achieved when there are **constructive working relationships** between professionals and family members, and between professionals themselves. This has been shown to be the case, both nationally and internationally, at all levels of need and intervention.

In order to build effective relationships and work inclusively and respectfully with families, Signs of Safety focuses on **both** the family’s strengths **and** the safety of the child or young person. This recognises that, despite the concerns and difficulties, all families have strengths, and by building on these strengths we can increase safety and wellbeing for children and young people.

Many professionals within the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust will already be familiar with the Signs of Safety approach and how effective it is in engaging families. You can read more about the approach on www.SignsofSafety.net

2. Why are we adopting Signs of Safety?

The Health and Social Care Board in Northern Ireland and all 5 Trusts are implementing Signs of Safety as our way of working with families because this will support us to achieve the type of service that children, young people, parents and carers have told us they want.

Children, young people, parents and carers have told us they want:

- **To be listened to**
- **To be part of developing their plans, to understand what the concerns are and why they need a plan**
- **For professionals to be clear with them about what is going to, or could happen**

SEHSCT want to **always** put children and young people **first and foremost** in everything that we do. Best practice is child-focused, solution-orientated, and respectful and inclusive of families, and this is what we want to achieve through adopting Signs of Safety.

Where it has been adopted by other local authorities and Tulsa it has been welcomed by families.

Families have reported that (often for the first time) they are clear about what services expect from them. Families particularly like that their views and strengths are acknowledged as well as their weaknesses understood.

There is a clear evidence base that shows that Signs of Safety achieves better outcomes for children, young people and families. Studies have shown that it results in:

- Better and more focused relationships with families
- Parents have a better understanding of the impact on their children, and their children's perspectives
- Practitioners are clearer on what the risks are, and what is expected of all parties, resulting in better decision making for families
- A more individualised approach for families
- Improved working between practitioners
- Reduction in the number of children brought into care □ Reduction in the time cases are open
- Increased morale of the social work workforce – because the work is focused on what they came into the profession to do

3. What do we want to achieve?

Through adopting Signs of Safety, we aim to achieve:

- **The very best outcomes** for children, young people and families
- **Child-focused services** that put the needs of children and young people first
- **Inclusive practice** – families are supported to develop their own solutions leading to empowered families and sustainable outcomes
- **Empowered professionals** – professionals across the partnership feel confident in having difficult conversations with families, are supported in their decision making, and see the impact of their work on families, **leading to robust partnership working** and increased **job satisfaction and strong recruitment and retention**

4. So what will be different?

Signs of Safety is a framework for **how** we work – so it will affect every element of our practice and how we do things – from our culture, to how we interact with families, how we conduct meetings, what we expect from families, what we record... it will affect just about everything we do!

Using Signs of Safety will mean that:

- You will be asked about the **impact** on the child or young person
- You will be asked about families' **strengths** as well as the concerns
- **Planning and meetings will work differently** (e.g. Review meetings and Core Groups) – these will have a similar format to Child Protection Conferences and will focus on the three columns – concerns, strengths and next steps.
- You will be asked to **scale** how worried you are about the impact of the current situation on the child/ young person on a scale of 0-10. This is used to help everyone understand and discuss their level of concern and assessment of risk (both professionals and families).
- You will be part of developing **danger/ worry statements** and **safety/ wellbeing goals** – which set out very clearly for the family what the concerns are and what we want to achieve
- You will see a **change in language** away from professional language to clear and simple language which is easier for families to understand
- Professionals will have a more **coaching and questioning role** – supporting families to develop their own solutions
- You will have access to tools and ways of working that make it easier to **involve** children and young people and their families.

Signs of Safety is not a ‘bolt on’ or added extra to your work – it says how you will carry out the same work you do now. Using Signs of Safety effectively depends on using the skills and expertise you have already developed within your profession, so it isn’t about forgetting what you have learned so far and starting again.

5. How widespread will we adopt it?

Signs of Safety is being implemented throughout Northern Ireland. The HSCB aim that this will be our one consistent way of working across all our children’s services, LAC Child Protection 16+ and Prevention. We will be starting the roll out with Children’s Services and Prevention work.

6. How does Signs of Safety fit with my service?

Signs of Safety has its origins in child protection work, but it is a way of working that readily adapts to working with families in a range of situations. Other areas have successfully adopted Signs of Safety more widely across children and families’ services and in health services. For services where the main focus is not the safety of the child (as in child protection), the same methods are used but are tailored to the focus of the work, so plans still focus on what’s working well, what we’re concerned about, what needs to happen, and use a scaling question.

A scaling question for 16+ team and pathway planning:

Success Scale: On a scale of 0 to 10 where 10 means your (the young person’s) life is ‘on track’ to get where you want to go in life and 0 my life’s a complete mess - where are you?

7. How much time will it take to use?

Signs of Safety is not a ‘bolt on’ or added extra to your work – it just specifies **how** you will carry out the same work you do now. Adapting to something new always takes more time than just doing something you are already familiar with, so we do expect that initially it will take a bit longer to use the Signs of Safety approach. We are providing additional support to assist with this transition. However, we hope that like other practitioners who have adopted it, you will find that it is interesting, rewarding, and in line with what you feel your work should be about, and most importantly – that it helps families to recognise and make changes, and results in better outcomes for children. Signs of Safety is a concise and focused way of working, and other authorities have found that cases are resolved or moved on more quickly – as families are more engaged, risks are much better understood, and the

work is much more focused. So as we become more experienced in using the model we expect that cases will remain open for less time which should create more time to spend with families. In the long term, we expect this approach to reduce demand to our high level services through achieving sustainable outcomes for our families.

8. Will good case examples be available to support us?

Yes – and we'll identify these from our own good practice within our service. The SOS team will have learning material from the SOS knowledge bank and we also have local cases that have used SOS we can draw upon. This model has been piloted in the Western Trust for 4 years and they have many examples for us to draw upon.

9. Are partners on board?

All our strategic partner leads at the Northern Ireland Safeguarding Children Board (are aware that we will be adopting Signs of Safety and are fully committed to adopting this within their own agencies as a culture and way of working. We will have partner Practice Leads who will receive in depth Signs of Safety training both within the Statutory and Voluntary agencies and will be a champion and point of contact and support for Signs of Safety within their agencies. The GAL have also had specific awareness raising sessions and attended the two day training to develop their knowledge on SOS.

10. How will it work with Web Based UNOCINI?

We are currently working with Paris and also the Unocini regional forums so that the forms reflect and support Signs of Safety practice structure. This will take a little time but we are aware that changes need to happen and we welcome your views on this as the implementation develops.

11. Is this a long term commitment?

Yes, the Department, HSCB all 5 HSCT are fully committed to adopting this approach as our way of working in the long term. We are at the start of the Journey but there is a strong regional commitment to the implementation of Signs of Safety.

12. Will practitioners be able to be involved in developing the approach?

Yes – very much so, as it's got to work for you, otherwise it won't work. Views from teams will be sought through surveys and will be represented by the Signs of Safety Practice Leads and Practice Champions, who will troubleshoot and address any issues teams or individuals are having with Signs of Safety, as well as identify, share and celebrate examples of good practice.

13. How will children, young people and families find out about this?

We will make information on Signs of Safety for families and other residents available on our website. We will develop leaflets to give to families and we will have posters explaining the process also in our local offices. We will also be developing a way of gaining regular feedback from children, young people, parents and carers on the quality of our services so we know what's working for families, and where and what we can improve.

14. How will we know if it is working?

We will collect information from a range of sources, including feedback from children, young people, parents and carers, feedback from practitioners and partners, audit findings and performance information. We will use these to evaluate how Signs of Safety is working for us so we can respond to any areas which aren't working as well as we want them to. Ultimately we will judge our success by the outcomes we achieve for our children and young people.

15. How will risks be managed when the approach is focused on strengths and building relationships?

Some professionals worry that a strength-based approach may underplay the seriousness of the risks involved. Signs of Safety is a very robust approach to assessing risk, and contains specific measures and methods to assess and communicate risk. One of the strengths of Signs of Safety as a model is that it makes the risks very explicit to families, and supports families to recognise the risks and be accountable for making changes for their children. All Signs of Safety plans include a 'danger statement' which makes it very clear what the concerns are and what the consequences of these could be for the child.

Tools for working with children and young people, such as the three houses model, gain the child's views on their worries, and these are presented to the parents. This enables parents to understand the impact of the risks on the child and provides them with real insight and incentive to change. Another concern some people have is that by building relationships with a family they are in some way condoning the abuse. Signs of Safety argues that having a relationship with someone is essential in supporting them to recognise what needs to change, and enabling them to feel that they can then achieve those changes. Signs of Safety requires that professionals are very clear about the level of their concerns, and in no way would advocate that professionals condone or minimise the risks involved. It also requires that professionals are respectful of the families' views; recognise differences of opinion, and the families' strengths, as all families have strengths no matter what their deficits. Recognising strengths gives families and professionals something to explore and build on, and families report that this is key in enabling them to feel they can achieve changes for their children.

If you want to know more about Signs of Safety, check out the Signs of Safety website at www.SignsofSafety.net