

**Common Assessment without borders:
Best Practice Guidance for Cross-Border Working and
the Common Assessment Framework**

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Part One: Introduction

Purpose of the Guide

The purpose of the guide is to set out best practice for children and young people's services in using the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) across Local Authority boundaries in the West Midlands.

It is acknowledged that practice will vary between Local Authority areas. For example, some areas may have multi-agency teams, others do not. This variation in practice is regarded as a strength, which increases innovation and opportunities for improving service delivery; it is not necessarily a barrier to effective cross-border working.

The guide will assist children's services to work in the best interests of children and young people to achieve improved outcomes and fulfil their potential. It is not concerned with maintaining organisational boundaries.

Partners in each Local Authority area will need to promote the guidance and consider how it will be used in practice.

For the purpose of this guide, the term 'cross border working' refers to differences in working practice between two local authorities that might share a border and positive attempts to resolve working issues that might arise as a result. In many instances, the Local Authority areas will share a border, however there will be exceptions.

Why do we need a Best Practice Guide?

There may be times when a Common Assessment has been initiated in respect of a child/young person that might involve practitioners delivering services across geographical boundaries, e.g. a child lives in one Local Authority area but attends school or nursery or uses health or leisure services in a different Local Authority area. There may also be occasions when a Common Assessment is initiated by a practitioner in one authority and the child/young person moves to another area part way through the process.

Best practice within cross border working is important to provide clarity and a 'beneficial experience' of the Common Assessment process for children, young people and their families as well as the practitioners involved.

These key points need to be considered and linked to the Key Principles, as set out below and which form the foundation of this document:

- The decision to share or not to share information about a child should always be based on professional judgment, supported by the cross-Government 'Information Sharing: Guidance for practitioners and managers (published in 2008) and informed by training.

- Decisions should be centred on the child or young person's needs (e.g. to have considered consent about information sharing which is not focused on parent/carers' needs).

Who should use the Guide?

This guide is intended for use by any practitioner, in any sector, when supporting a child or young person through a Common Assessment which involves cross border working. It is hoped that this will be a helpful and practical guide.

It will also be useful for operational line managers to have awareness of this guide.

Structure of the Guide

This guide establishes key principles of good practice and uses these to identify good practice at each stage of the common assessment process:

- Prepare
- Discuss
- Deliver
- Evaluate

How to use the Guide?

This is a practical source of information, advice and guidance for practitioners working with children, young people and their families using the CAF process when there are cross border issues. It should be used in the context of local CAF processes and procedures.

A list of regional CAF Managers/Co-ordinators who may be contacted for advice, guidance or support with cross border issues has been included as an appendix to this document.

This guide should also be considered in conjunction with the West Midlands Regional Safeguarding Network Inter Authority Protocol for Children In Need (Feb 2006).

Who produced the Guide?

This Guide has been produced following input from a number of Local Authority areas within the West Midlands and has been ratified at West Midlands CAF Managers Group. Membership of this group is shown in Appendix 1.

The timescale for the production of this guide is as follows:

July – begin work on draft v.1
Nov – CAF Managers provide case studies
Dec – full draft v.1
Jan 08 – draft to CAF Managers Group and agree consultation process / feedback
End of Jan – full draft v.2
Feb – stakeholder consultation
Mar - feedback from consultation
April – final guide available

Terminology

Integrated multi-agency support - a co-ordinated multi-agency response to meet needs identified through a Common Assessment that produces a solution focused plan as a result. In local areas this may be called Team Around the Child (TAC), Integrated Support Meeting, Team Around the Family (TAF), Child Concern Panel and so on.

Lead Professional – person responsible for co-ordinating actions identified in the assessment process and being a single point of contact for children with additional needs being supported by more than one practitioner.

N.B in relation to cross border working, the term Lead Professional might differ in some areas. However the functions of the role should be the same.

Budget Holding Lead Professional – arrangements for the provision of funds for Lead Professionals to procure goods and commission services directly from providers in order to provide better service packages for children and families whose needs are identified through the Common Assessment process.

ContactPoint – a national directory that will be the quick way to find out who else is working with a child or young person

Electronic Common Assessment Framework (eCAF) – a proposed national system that will electronically enable the Common Assessment process

DCSF – Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) are the central government department who are leading on ContactPoint and the development of eCAF.

CWDC – Children’s Workforce Development Council, the organisation providing the national lead on the Common Assessment Framework.

Disputes

Please note that wherever possible CAF Managers/Co-ordinators will seek to resolve issues by direct discussion or via the West Midlands Regional CAF Co-ordinators Group. Contact details can be found in the appendices. Where there are areas of dispute between practitioners in different areas which cannot be resolved by negotiation between those practitioners and their

respective CAF Managers/Co-ordinators, these should be escalated through direct line management of both parties.

Review

This document will be reviewed 12 months after the final version is available.

It is important to note that the programme of work around ContactPoint and eCAF is still developing and as progress is made, this may impact on this guidance.

At the time of writing the DCSF have announced plans for a national eCAF solution. This will have an impact on the way in which information is shared, particularly with cross border cases, in the future. Further detail on this, is yet to be used by the DCSF.

ContactPoint is another national project that will impact on the way in which we share information. The current projected implementation date is 2009. Extensive guidance and business processes will be released by the DCSF on ContactPoint and these will be considered when this cross border guidance is reviewed.

Part Two: Key Principles

These key principles are applied throughout this guidance.

An overarching principle when considering this guidance should be the need to ensure a level of consistency during the Common Assessment process. It is recognised that there will be different priorities, particularly around commissioning, service development and service provision, in different areas. However, as best practice, we should ensure that this principle is adhered to in relation to positive outcomes for children, young people and their families, when working across borders.

Principle 1: The best interests of the child or young person are the priority in cross-border working

Principle 2: A child's address does not prevent the start of a common assessment by any practitioner

Principle 3: Changes in practice between areas will be communicated to the child, young person, parent and carer.

Principle 4: The child, young person, parent and carer will be encouraged to participate in all stages of the CAF process

Part Three: Best Practice, Cross-Border Working and the Common Assessment Process

Stage 1 - Prepare

Principle 1: The best interests of the child or young person are the priority in cross-border working

Undertaking cross-border networking between practitioners, managers and teams in other areas should be encouraged so that when a cross border case arises, contacts have already been made and these will clarify if there are any slight differences in Common Assessment practice in other areas. This will make the 'prepare' stage run more smoothly and most importantly, ensure that the child / young person is not adversely affected by cross border working issues in relation to the Common Assessment Framework.

At this stage it is vital to be very clear about the criteria for completing a Common Assessment. Reference should be made to national and/or local guidance

Principle 2: A child's address does not prevent the start of a Common Assessment by any practitioner

Any practitioner working with a child/young person who identifies an unmet need can begin the Common Assessment process, regardless of where the child / young person lives or where the practitioner practices.

When a Common Assessment is initiated and cross border issues are identified, it is the responsibility of the initiating practitioner to inform their local CAF Manager/Co-ordinator. It is then the responsibility of the latter to inform their counterpart in the other area involved in order to broker contact between practitioners who need to become involved in delivering services to the child/young person. This will also facilitate identification of whether or not a Common Assessment has already been completed in respect of the child / young person.

Each Local Authority area will highlight the importance of this practice when delivering Integrated Working training.

The Common Assessment process and procedures of the Local Authority area in which the practitioner is based will be followed until the multi-agency meeting and the allocation of the Lead Professional/Practitioner, after which the process and procedures of the Local Authority area in which the Lead Professional/Practitioner is based will take precedent.

It is recognised that different areas co-ordinate the 'recording of Common Assessments' function in different ways. Local CAF Managers/Co-ordinators will be able to offer advice.

Best practice as part of the 'prepare' stage will be that documentation used by the initiating practitioner is accepted by any other practitioners involved at this stage.

Until ContactPoint is established nationally, the CAF Manager/Co-ordinator or equivalent in a local area is responsible for notifying CAF Manager/Co-ordinators in other relevant Local Authority areas about a completed Common Assessment.

N.B It is generally accepted practice that only practitioners who have received CAF training can undertake a Common Assessment. Practitioners will need to clarify this through local procedures.

All regions agree that they will accept each others' CAF forms.

The experience of Common Assessments where there are cross border issues needs to be seamless for children, young people and families but flexible for practitioners.

In circumstances where a Common Assessment is initiated by a practitioner delivering a service in an area different from the one in which the child/young person lives, other practitioners who deliver services in the child/young person's home area are expected to travel across borders to attend TAC/Family Support Meetings.

Practitioners are not expected to deliver services outside their normal areas of delivery, unless prior agreement has been made between the practitioner, his/her line manager and the local CAF Manager/Co-ordinator.

A Regional Risks and Issues Log will be maintained by the West Midlands CAF Managers/Co-ordinators Group.

Principle 3: Changes in practice between areas will be communicated to the child, young person, parent and carer.

The Common Assessment process will need to be explained clearly to the child / young person and their family by the practitioner initiating the Common Assessment. If there is a subsequent change of process following the identification of the Lead Professional as a result of the Lead Professional practising in a different area, significant differences in process must be explained to the child/young person and their family. This process needs to be a seamless experience for the family and the practitioners need to be flexible in their approach in order to make this happen.

Principle 4: The child, young person, parent and carer will be encouraged to participate in all stages of the CAF process

The practitioner who is going to initiate the Common Assessment must approach the family to explain the process and gain consent. It is always best practice to explain how involved they will be at all stages. It would also be useful to give them a Common Assessment leaflet from the area whose Common Assessment process will be used (alternatively there is one available on the Every Child Matters website). This should explain all matters around information being shared and their rights.

After consent is gained, the next stage can begin.

Stage 2 - Discuss

Principle 1: The best interests of the child or young person are the priority in cross-border working

The Lead Professional may be the practitioner who identifies an additional need that requires addressing and thus initiates a Common Assessment or may be selected subsequently at a TAC/Family Support Meeting.

The Lead Professional co-ordinates the multi-agency response. Where there are cross border issues this may be with support from the local CAF Manager/Co-ordinator. The Lead Professional is not accountable for the actions of other agencies.

The Lead Professional should ideally have a good working relationship with the child/young person and their family. They may be required to act as an advocate on their behalf. This should be considered when electing a Lead Professional across borders. The views of the child or young person should also be taken into account. This will invariably contribute to a more successful outcome.

When services are needed that the initiating Local Authority cannot provide, appropriate practitioners from the area in which the child or young person lives should be invited to attend the integrated multi-agency support meeting. Where a service can not be provided, this gap in provision should be recorded on a Regional CAF Issues Log.

It is essential that the practitioner who initiates the Common Assessment informs her/his local CAF Manager/Co-ordinator of any cross border issues as early as possible in the process. The respective CAF Managers/Co-ordinators will then be able to work together to ensure that the appropriate practitioners are able to attend the meeting irrespective of the area in which they normally deliver their service.

Principle 2: A child's address does not prevent the start of a Common Assessment by any practitioner

Good communication is paramount between agencies; consent needs to be sought from young people and their families when sharing information about existing Common Assessments or when a new Common Assessment is to be started.

If a practitioner identifies that a child or young person has an unmet need in any area, she/he should complete a Common Assessment and as an outcome identify with the family an appropriate agency to meet the need. If that information is unknown in cross border circumstances, the local CAF Manager/Co-ordinator will be able to assist by contacting their counterpart in the other area.

Principle 3: Changes in practice between areas will be communicated to the child, young person, parent and carer.

Parents, carers, children and young people should be communicated with in a manner that retains their involvement as central and inclusive to the IISaM (Improving Information Sharing and Management) process. All communication should be in a user-friendly format. Changes in local practice will not be unusual and full commitment needs to be undertaken by practitioners to communicate this effectively. This should include literature sent to families and young people clearly explaining what they can expect throughout the Common Assessment process.

Principle 4: The child, young person, parent and carer will be encouraged to participate in all stages of the CAF process

Cross border issues or discussions between agencies should not prevent children, young people and their families from participating fully in the Common Assessment process and should not hinder the seamless process that service users should experience.

The full involvement of parents, carers, children and young people is the key to successful outcomes. Discussions need to be open and honest with an emphasis on delivering a solution focused outcome which will need to be regularly reviewed and monitored. Participation should include the right for young people and their families to be consulted on service design and delivery.

Consideration should be given to where meetings are held and the importance of taking the views of children and young people into account. As best practice there should be the flexibility for practitioners to travel across borders in order to attend CAF related meetings.

Stage 3 - Deliver

The most likely outcome of a Common Assessment is one of the following:

- **Concerns are resolved:** no additional action required.
- **Actions agreed for one service and/or the child, young person and family:** *see national CAF Practitioners guide pg 21.*
- **Actions identified for more than one service or agency:** *see national CAF practitioner guidance from the CWDC, p.21.*

Principle 1: The best interests of the child or young person are the priority in cross-border working

Any actions identified in the CAF Action Plan must be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time bound (SMART).

Principle 2: A child's address does not prevent the start of a Common Assessment by any practitioner

The practitioner who initiates the Common Assessment should involve all necessary practitioners from other Local Authority areas, ensuring that the child/young person and family are able to attend and participate. The Lead Professional function is particularly important in ensuring that consistent and regular communication, especially with the family, is maintained.

Irrespective of the Local Authority area in which the Lead Professional is based, any applications for funding of services will be made to the area in which the child or young person resides. Where that 'home' area has Budget Holding Lead Professional (BHLF) arrangements, the local CAF Manager/Co-ordinator will be able to advise the practitioner about the process for applying for funds from the BHLF budget.

This further highlights the importance of the initiating practitioner informing their local CAF Manager/Co-ordinator as soon as possible in all cross-border circumstances; and of the latter informing their counterpart in the other area without delay.

Principle 3: Changes in practice between Local Authority areas will be communicated to the child, young person, parent and carer.

Practitioners need to be open and honest about what services and assistance can realistically be provided for children, young people and their families. Any identified gaps in service provision should be fed through local commissioning processes and also to local CAF Managers/Co-ordinators, who will ensure that such issues are raised at West Midlands Regional meetings.

Any difficulties in the child/young person's home authority meeting needs through BHLF should be communicated to the initiating area's CAF Manager/Co-ordinator as soon as possible.

Principle 4: The child, young person, parent and carer will be encouraged to participate in all stages of the CAF process

Practitioners should check that the child /young person and their family are happy with how the plan is working. They should also agree with the child/ young person how they will check that the plan is working and what they will do if it is not. The Lead Professional should work closely with the child/young person to ensure that the Plan is working.

It is the child / young person's plan – the agencies cannot change it without their consent.

If any practitioner involved in a Common Assessment at any stage identifies that a child or young person is at risk of Significant Harm, she/he will follow their local safeguarding procedures. It is best practice to inform the child/young person and family that that is happening **unless doing so is likely to expose the child/young person to further risk**. Practitioners should always seek local advice if they are unsure.

Stage 4 - Evaluate

Principle 1: The best interests of the child or young person are the priority in cross-border working

The Lead Professional role is key in gathering feedback from children/young people, their families and practitioners involved in the CAF process. In cross border circumstances feedback should be forwarded to the local CAF Manager/Co-ordinator, which will in turn inform potential changes to this guidance.

Principle 2: A child's address does not prevent the start of a common assessment by any practitioner

The cross border working arrangements and their impacts in any individual Common Assessment should be considered in the evaluation.

Principle 3: Changes in practice between areas will be communicated to the child, young person, parent and carer.

The views of all practitioners should be included in the evaluation, whether based in the same or different local Authority areas.

Principle 4: The child, young person, parent and carer will be encouraged to participate in all stages of the CAF process

The views of the child or young person should be taken into account when the Common Assessment process has come to an end and is being evaluated. Contact your CAF Manager/Co-ordinator to identify any local procedures to be

followed when recording the views of the child/young person as part of the evaluation.

Part Four: Summary

It should be made clear that this is only a best practice guide and does not intend to undermine any professional judgement or experience in relation to the CAF process. As mentioned at the beginning, changes to the CAF process should be expected from area to area and these should be embraced, so that we can all learn from this best practice.

Appendices:

- Appendix 1: Membership of the West Midlands CAF Managers Group
- Appendix 2: Links to online children's services directories
- Appendix 3: Sources of further information inc. local CAF websites