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# Bristol Practice Framework

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Children and Families Services





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## What does our existing workforce say about the way we work with children and families?

"We work with children to help keep them safe and stay safe with their families".

"We work together to find out what's already working well for the family and what needs to change".

"We don't give up on children"

"We help families to recognise who is already helping them and help identify any other help they may need".

"We understand how difficult things may feel for families and the reasons for this"

"We support families to make positive changes in their lives"

"We listen to children and help them understand how important they are"

"We genuinely care"

"We may have to make difficult decisions that families may not agree with, but we will explain the reasons and listen to the family's opinions".

"We are someone on the family's side"

"We see foster carers as equals and value their skills"





# Introduction



**Children, young people and their families are at the core of all we do, this is the central focus of the Bristol Practice Framework.**

The 'framework' aids our social worker's and social care workforce in their learning and development, which centres on impact and outcomes for the child or young person as they experience our practice and delivery. We are building social work practice situated within a systemic framework.

This includes a requirement for social workers to examine, understand and demonstrate best practice. This means that all our interventions are undertaken 'with' families, children and young people, rather than 'to' or 'for'; in ways that build relationships and are characterised by respecting each other's 'world view'.

We have high aspirations for our families and match these with reciprocal high support and high challenge. We are more likely to achieve change for children if we have empathy for them, their context and family.

The principles we outline in the 'framework' now are integral to how we approach and explain our work with children and their families – all our social work activity at all levels of intervention is informed by what we know about the impact of trauma on child and adolescent development. We recognise that the experiences that form us, and the families of the children and young people we work with, will inform decisions and impact on perception and behaviours. We understand the journey that the people we work with have been on and most significantly we recognise how relationships

and interactions have the power to heal.

We also expect high support and challenge in relation to our practice as this enables learning, improvement and change. Change is crucial. Our 'framework' will not be static, just as our practice itself will not be static. As we learn, grow and evolve, and new research evidence is developed, the 'framework' will evolve too.

Developing good communication, assessment, analysis and planning skills will enable us to bring a professional framework to our involvements and interventions. It is this framework of practice skills that enable us to bring children and families to a position where they can assist us in the decisions that affect them.

One of our key goals is to support families to be resilient and to care safely for their children. We also aim to return children from care to their families where it is safe to do so. When we consider 'care' or indeed a return home from care, for a child or sibling group it is with due process and skilled risk balance and assessment. Fundamentally our task is to prevent significant harm. The Bristol Practice Framework supports us in our practice to use our value base to test our decisions and responses; to manage, mitigate and balance risk and, when we have to take action to protect a child we do so ethically, with their family however constituted.

**Dr Jacqui Jensen**  
Executive Director People

## Why do we have a Practice Framework?

Everything we do is about delivering good outcomes for children. Delivering the highest quality service to children, families, and communities within Bristol doesn't happen by its self, it takes hard work, dedication, and focus from everyone within both the children's workforce and the wider council. We strive to create and embed a culture of respect, support, and challenge in order to enable people at all levels of the system to play their part in improving the lives of children in Bristol, and especially those who are the most vulnerable. We are unapologetically ambitious for children and this ambition is at the core of everything we do.

The work we do with children and families is complex, wide-ranging, and spans many teams. A Practice Framework helps to focus our approach in order to ensure the work we do with children and families across the service is grounded in the same theories, approaches, values, principles, and beliefs. The Practice Framework provides an evidence-based structure within which skill, knowledge, and good practice can be shared. It gives a common language to communicate across teams and a shared vision for children and families in Bristol.

The Practice Framework enables us to articulate the culture of practice in Bristol, one which embraces and promotes difference and individuality. Providing a narrative for our approach to help us attract creative and dynamic staff who have the skills and right outlook to join us, as well as providing a framework for our own staff to hold us to account in ensuring they have the opportunities to develop and deliver high-quality services to children. It also serves to support our partner agencies in understanding the way we work, providing a context for our approach, and the principles which underpin this.

Our Practice Framework has been created in consultation with practitioners from across the service committed to ensuring that children and families receive high quality, individualised and proportionate support and intervention.



# What are the principles that underpin our approach

**Our approach to working with children and families is shaped by both our values and the law under which we practice. There are four core strands that influence our approach: our principles, our values, our behaviours and the legal context in which we work.**

## **Our principles:**

We firmly believe that children should grow up within their own families and communities when it is safe for them to do so. We are committed to providing support to ensure this can happen. We understand that there are times when families need some additional support and the majority of the time this support can be offered by the universal services children are already accessing. When additional support from targeted services is needed we are committed to ensuring that this is provided in a timescale which is helpful to the child and their family. We work with families to enable them to find solutions to difficulties or concerns within their own network. This means that when we are working with a child we will not only focus on them and their parents but will also work with the family to include other people in their network who can offer them support. We do this in order to build strength and resilience in families and to avoid creating dependency on services.

We want to 'work with' children and families, not 'do to'. We understand that there are times when our involvement in a child's life might have unintended consequences (i.e. create stress or anxiety for children and families) so we work hard to show respect, honesty, and empathy and build relationships with families which mean we are able to support them to make changes when needed.

We understand that there are times when people do not feel ready or able to engage with our support and in these times we will show patience, compassion, and respect in order to support families to build trust in us. Our aim is to tread lightly in the lives of children and families to support them to find solutions and build strengths. We believe that children and families can recover from and cope with trauma and we support families to achieve this.

For children who can't remain in the care of someone in their network, we parent and protect them, supporting them to achieve to their full potential in spite of any adversity they may have experienced. We advocate for children in care and provide them with opportunities to flourish and build on their existing strengths. We don't give up on any child. We guide children into adulthood and remain there for them no matter what life throws at them. We are clear on how we support children in our care and those progressing on to adulthood and this is set out in the [Bristol Pledge](#)

## A valued and healthy workforce

The health and wellbeing of our workforce is a core component of our Practice Framework. We understand that you can't achieve any of the above without a healthy, stable, and sustainable workforce. Our workers are our most valuable asset in helping families achieve and sustain change. We value the skill, knowledge, and individuality of everyone in our workforce. We value different perspectives and reflective discussions. Whilst our teams across the service are structured differently, we are committed to ensuring that everyone receives monthly supervision which includes reflective discussion and reflections on the individual's wellbeing and professional development needs. We are also committed to supporting continued professional development of practitioners within the workforce, investing in our workforce to ensure that children and families receive the best possible support.



### Bristol Values:

**Dedicated, Curious, Collaborative,  
We Take Ownership, Show Respect**

(start with the corporate values)

In addition to these corporate values, in Children and Families Services to strive to work with **honesty, empathy** and **compassion, valuing diversity** and **challenging inequality**.

### The legal context:

The rights of children and their families are protected in law, and any involvement we have in their lives is underpinned by these laws. The duties of the local authority in respect of children are set out in the Children Act 1989 and Working Together 2018. We recognise the need for these duties to be undertaken sensitively and whilst respecting the family's human rights<sup>1</sup>.

There are times when we are required to intervene in a child's life to keep them safe, against the parent's wishes. When we do this we will always seek to understand the situation, show empathy, and avoid bias in our decision making. We will respond proportionately to the risk and will always seek to support families to find their own solutions to concerns whether this is in their existing network or supporting them to develop a new network of support leading to safety. The law acknowledges that there are times when intervention from the local authority is not warranted and we remain mindful of this within all of our interventions<sup>2</sup>. We strive to be balanced and proportionate in our involvement with families.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/42/contents>

<sup>2</sup> Hadley Judgement, 2015 - <https://www.familylawweek.co.uk/site.aspx?i=ed143260>



## Our behaviours:

Our values and principles are visible at all levels of the organisation. We value relationship-based practice and achieve this by embodying our values and principles in our work with families. We want practitioners to know and understand the children and families they work with and in order to do this, we expect them to have awareness of the values and qualities/ experience / lens they bring to their work and a willingness to reflect on these, learn and adapt. This includes regular reflection on the language we use when talking to and about the children and families we work with. We understand that treating people with respect and dignity needs to be modelled throughout the organisation. We understand the need for our senior managers to be visible and approachable and we value the views of workers at all levels of the organisation.

We work hard to build positive relationships with families and communities, to support them, to listen to them, and to understand their perspective. We are inquisitive for the sake of children and get alongside them to understand their experience and aspirations. Our managers ensure that practitioners have the space needed to invest time in their relationships with children and families, which in turn develops relationships founded in mutual respect and open dialogue. We do this so that we can build a foundation that supports the open and sometimes difficult conversations that are needed in order to enable change. We also welcome and actively seek feedback from children and families, reviewing, learning and changing when we get something wrong.

## The outcomes we want to achieve

We want the children of Bristol to thrive and be able to take advantage of the opportunities Bristol can offer. We want children to go into adulthood with the skills, resilience, and capacity to live healthy and fulfilling lives. We want the children and families we work with to feel respected, listened to, understood, and empowered. Our aim is to help families and communities overcome adversity and achieve sustained change.

We want families and communities to feel supported in identifying and building on existing strengths in order to create safety and manage risk. We will know that we have successfully delivered our practice framework when children and families consistently report that they have felt respected and valued during our involvement with them and that we have enabled them to reflect on their situation and make positive changes.



# The Bristol Approach

In recognising Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) we understand the impact of adversity and trauma on children's development and into adulthood. It also drives us to share knowledge with families and communities about adversity and trauma so that they are enabled to develop solutions that work for them. Trauma-informed approaches are the interventions we use which recognise the impact of ACEs, trauma, and complex trauma on individual and families' ability to cope, regulate their emotions, and recover.

In order to support families in achieving change, there are a number of different approaches and methodologies which underpin our practice in Bristol:

**Signs of Safety** is the framework we use to assess and respond to harm.

**Systemic Social Work Practice** provides the theories to understand the complexity of an individual's experiences and the influence they have on their ability to make and sustain change.

**Relationship based Practice** means strengthening relationships between people as well as strengthening social connections within communities.

**Contextual Safeguarding** enables us to assess and respond to harm that affects children outside their families.



## Signs of Safety

Signs of Safety (SofS) is a strength-based practice model that provides a framework for our work with children and families. All practitioners bring a unique knowledge base to their work with children and families depending on their role and experiences.

Signs of Safety is designed to enable practitioners to use this knowledge and take a strengths-based approach to achieve change for children and families. 'Strengths-based' means that we do not

focus solely on the presenting issue but look at the strengths already present in the child's life and network.

The Signs of Safety Framework supports workers to build on these strengths and use these to create safety for the child. The Signs of Safety structure supports families to identify the 'next steps' needed in order to achieve change.

Alongside this, the Signs of Safety Framework provides a number of tools for working directly with children both to help practitioners to understand their life better but also to help children understand the reason for our involvement and how decisions about their life were made.

## Systemic Social Work Practice

Our systemic practice approach offers a theory of change that enables practitioners to engage with the complexity and challenges faced by many vulnerable families. This approach places children and families firmly at the centre of our involvement. It encourages practitioners to avoid looking at presenting issues in isolation but to consider individuals as part of the wider system/context in which they exist. Systemic practitioners form part of this system, joining with the family to share open and reflective communication with questions framed to help the family to reflect on their situation from a different perspective. This in turn may help the family to notice things that they otherwise may not have been able to acknowledge.

Systemic practice encourages practitioners to reflect on the role they play in facilitating change within families and fits well with the principles of relationship based practice, acknowledging the key role of relationships in enabling change. Systemic practice encourages practitioners to try different techniques in order to help achieve change. Systemic practice doesn't only apply to families but also to individuals and organisations. Reflection on the way that we communicate and understand different contexts is a core aspect of systemic practice.

Systemic practice requires practitioners to be trauma-informed. In Bristol, we understand that the trauma that people



experience in their life (often as children) can have a lasting impact on their wellbeing, mental and physical health, and life chances. Understanding this helps us recognise this impact and provides insight when supporting people to recover from trauma and making plans to protect children so that they don't continue to experience trauma. Trauma-informed approaches sit alongside systemic approaches as they encourage practitioners to look at the wider picture and not to focus solely on the presenting issue.

These approaches in turn support the concept of relationship based social work which can also be termed as a 'human approach' in which time is spent getting to know and understand the families we work with in order to create conditions to facilitate change.

## Relationship based Practice

### A human approach

This means in Bristol our practitioners focus on strengthening relationships between people as well as strengthening social connections within communities. We focus on building relationships with children, young people, and their families and connecting with the communities in which they live. This approach is also known as 'restorative practice'. We believe this helps us to better understand people's needs, connecting with them and supporting them to make positive changes, and achieve sustainable outcomes.

Aside from our direct work with children and families, we expect our workforce to work respectfully and restoratively with each other.



Our team structures support positive team relationships where self-reflection and reflexivity is promoted, in order to create conditions that enable people to feel empowered, safe to challenge others, and able to recover and move on following challenging situations.

This approach is fundamental in creating a learning environment based on mutual respect.

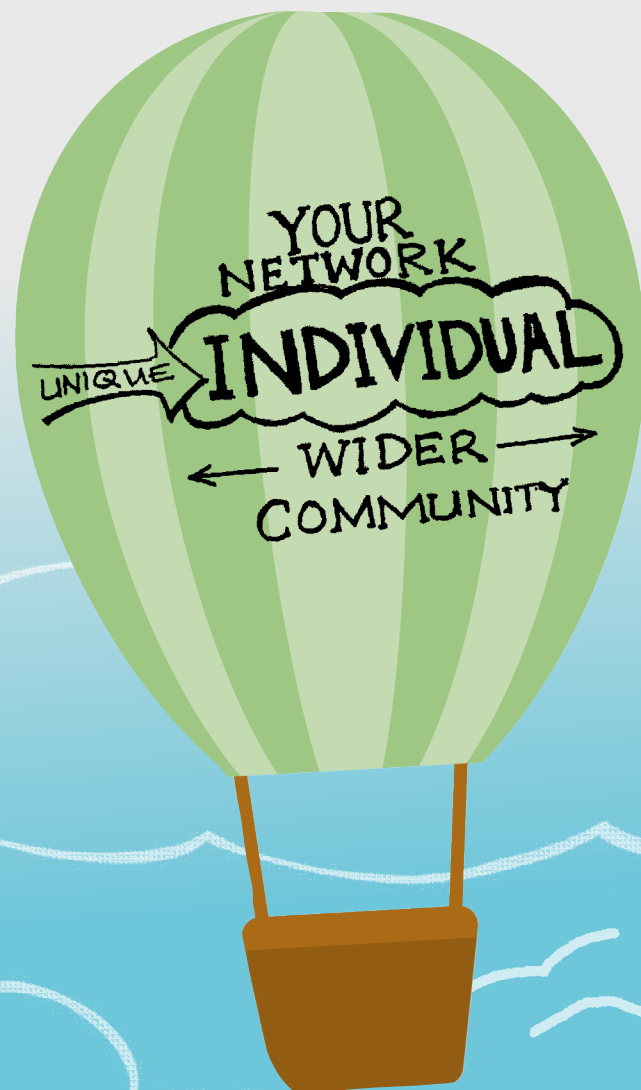


## Contextual safeguarding

In Bristol, we understand the need to support and protect children from harm outside of their own family and within the communities they live and spend time in. We acknowledge the influence and importance of an adolescents' peer group and the locations they spend time in, and undertake interventions with places, spaces, and groups as well as with individuals to create meaningful change.

In order to do this, we make it our business to work closely with partner agencies and communities in order to identify areas of risk and create plans to mitigate these risks.

We are committed to ensuring that we (and others) do not blame children who are the victims of criminal or sexual exploitation and we advocate for children who are not seen as victims by others.



# Other core components of the Bristol Practice Framework

## **A relentless focus on achieving permanence for children:**

Children often come into contact with Children's Services at a point where there is an element of instability in their lives. We know that children who grow up with instability in their lives experience poorer outcomes than they otherwise would. For this reason, we are focused on achieving stability (also referred to as permanence) for children at the earliest point of our involvement. This means that we do not look to find 'quick fix' solutions to issues that are likely to re-emerge for the child; we look to identify the underlying issues and to find meaningful solutions. Often this involves exploring the parent's own childhood and subsequent life experiences in order to understand how the parents' experiences shape their identity as a parent. As well as identifying the root cause of the issue, we focus on building on strengths and permanent relationships in the child's network to mitigate against any risk of future instability.

When it is not safe for a child to remain living with their parents for whatever reason, we engage with the people closest to the child in order to keep the child within their network and community whenever possible.

## **Children in our care:**

There are times when it is not possible for a child to remain in the care of their family or network. When this happens we are again committed to identifying and achieving sustainable solutions in order to achieve permanence for the child. We are committed and working hard to enable children to remain living in Bristol - their home town. When a child comes into our care we fully recognise the impact on the child and the need for the child to understand the reason they are not able to remain within their family at that time. We always look to find sustainable care arrangements and ensure our plans are informed by and explained to the child. We will always consider whether a child can safely return to their family and have a dedicated team to support specialist assessment and reunification when this is in the child's best interests.



Documents available in other formats:

If you would like this information in another language, Braille, audio tape, large print, easy English, BSL video or CD rom or plaintext please contact:

**[cypsworkforcedev@bristol.gov.uk](mailto:cypsworkforcedev@bristol.gov.uk)**