

Chronologies

Practice Guidance



Target audience: All staff in children's services

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1 What is a chronology?

1.1 A chronology is:

- a list in date order of significant events in a child or young person's life; and
- a concise record of fact.

1.2 We have two chronologies in Coventry: a case file chronology and a court chronology.

2 Why do we need chronologies?

2.1 We need chronologies because they:

- help our understanding of the child or young person;
- provide a useful overview of our cases;
- encourage us to work more closely with children, young people and families;
- help us to keep on top of our cases and review our thinking; and
- are nationally recognised and required as good practice.

Help our understanding

2.2 In Coventry, we recognise the importance of a child's history in helping us understand who they are, their present situation and what their future might hold. A good chronology can help us carry out more effective assessments. We can analyse the facts in a young person's life to spot, for example, patterns, risks and opportunities. A chronology is not an assessment, nor is it an end in itself. It can help you understand what is happening in the life of a child or family.

Useful overview

2.3 Chronologies are also useful to other workers and not just the allocated worker (for example, emergency duty workers, agency workers or others who are covering a case), managers, children's guardians, auditors and inspectors. If you are not familiar with a case, it is really helpful to understand, and quickly, 'the story' of the case. Here, either a sharp case summary or a concise chronology can provide that useful and critical information. It has to be something that is read easily and quickly – so needs to be punchy, concise and in plain English.

Better working together

- 2.4 Chronologies are also useful ways to help us work more closely with children, young people and families. As with all our recordings (unless for legal reasons), chronologies should be available to the person they are about. They should be aware that it is part of our recording and that it can and should be shared and discussed with them. This can be a *very* positive thing to do: for example, highlighting where they have succeeded - perhaps a parent reducing their drug dependency or a young person improving their school attendance. Sharing chronologies can also be an opportunity to check accuracy: for example, mistakes made with dates that might then get repeated in other records and reports.

Keep us on top of our work and check out our thinking

- 2.5 You must review and analyse your chronologies. If you don't, then why bother with them? Reflective supervision is a good place to do this. Or you might want to consider peer reviews where you and your colleagues review each other's chronologies to identify possible patterns, timescales and risks.
- 2.6 Also, on occasion, progress in working with a child and family, for whatever reasons, may drift. Several months could pass without any action and this is not always easy to identify from a record. A chronology of dates can help to highlight any such delay and drift.

3 When do we do chronologies?

- 3.1 All allocated cases must have a chronology. They should be started when a case is opened or re-opened.
- 3.2 In cases where the chronology is either missing or poor, it is important to concentrate on the most recent two years. If the case goes back longer, consider summarising what has happened (aim for no more than two pages) rather than individual dated entries. However, use your professional judgement and if you believe some historical detail should be usefully added to the chronology then add it. Where information may be difficult to find, we should record chronologies as best we can, reflecting our work here with the child or young person. Remember its job is to help us with the understanding of the present and what the future may hold. Ask yourself: *how would this help?*
- 3.3 A chronology should be updated as you go along – as with case file records. As you'll see, entries should be 'bullet-point' in approach – and usually just single sentences; so, should not take any time in writing.

4 How do we write our chronologies?

- 4.1 We have to write our chronologies in line with our definition of them: so each entry must be 'significant' (in your judgement), factual and concise. We want our chronologies to be easy to write and, crucially, easy to read. They need to

provide a *brief* overview: so we have to keep them short.

4.2 Chronologies need to be:

- in date order;
- concise;
- facts only; and
- updated regularly.

4.3 It is crucial we keep our chronologies as concise as possible. If every issue or contact is recorded, the chronology simply loses its value. It is, therefore, important that chronologies do not become repeats of the case notes and so detailed that we cannot see the wood for the trees.

4.4 Entries should be either bullet point style or a short sentence or two. Remember the detail can be elsewhere. But also remember the entry must be meaningful. You cannot argue that 'Telephone call from mum' is concise, but it tells us nothing about the significance of the call (if there is any) and is unhelpful and succeeds only in cluttering up the chronology. However, 'Telephone call from mum saying she was the victim of domestic violence at the weekend' tells us something worth reading. The detail of the allegation can be found in the case file.

4.5 Of course, there may be times when 'missed appointments' or 'children not seen' takes on significance. A 'child not seen' because he/she is at an after-school group is understandable. However, if a pattern seems to be emerging that is harder to explain or understand, it will be worth recording these. Even so, rather than have, say, 25 different entries reading 'Leo absconded from placement' – it might be better to sequence these into one entry. For example:

*1 Jan – 31 March – 25 incidents of Leo absconding
1 April – 30 June – 17 incidents of Leo absconding
1 July – 30 Sept – 5 incidents of Leo absconding*

4.6 So rather than this real example:

The situation of these children came before the court on 6 & 7 February 2013 when having heard representation on behalf of the parties and taking into account all the available information the court made Care Order's in respect of both children. (42 words)

We could have said:

7 February 2015 – Court Orders made for both children. (6 words)

4.7 Similarly, rather than:

The Local Authority's involvement with Leah's family began before she was born with the commencement, on 02.09.14, of a Pre-Birth Assessment that was eventually completed on 13.03.15, some four weeks after Leah's arrival. (33 words)

We could have said:

13 March 2015 – Leah's pre-birth assessment completed. (4 words)

- 4.8 It is also crucial we only stick to the facts. There is no need for commentary, opinion or interpretation within the chronology. So rather than:

25 April 2015 – home visit, house untidy and children unkempt. Mum is clearly struggling to manage the morning routine.

We could have said:

25 April 2015 – home visit at 8.30am. Children not up or dressed and were late for school by 30 minutes. Mum could not find any clean uniform.

- 4.9 The facts laid out in a chronology will help us with our analysis of the case: so let nothing clutter our thinking.

5 So, what goes into a chronology?

- 5.1 It has been said that chronologies are one of the least understood records in practice. This is partly because individuals, teams and organisations will often hold different ideas of what should and shouldn't be included in a chronology.

- 5.2 It is not an exact science: what might be a significant event in one child or young person's life will not necessarily be relevant to another. Ordinarily, a child or young person missing a health appointment or being collected from school will not be significant. But sometimes, in certain cases, it may well be. So, chronologies rely on your professional judgement. You will be best placed to know what is significant to the child or young person you are working with. But ask yourself, indeed convince yourself, why it needs to be included.

- 5.3 Often, if you are worried about risk, the temptation is to record in the chronology everything in the children's lives as well as the case record. For example, if you did not see the child or young person for a visit, do you put that in? Chronologies are not a substitute for effective recording so if you visited and did not see the child you would record that in the file. If there were serious concerns about the child, action would be taken to see the child. Nor is a chronology 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.

5.4 That said, there are events that (if known) would usually always make it into a chronology. These might include:

Family history	Date of birth of parents, other births, deaths, marriages, divorces, new partners and separations
Serious stress factors	Unemployment, accidents, injuries, domestic violence incidents, other critical incidents (leading to investigation), hospitalization, arrests, court appearances, prison, youth custody, deaths
Parental history	Care history, mental health, crime, substance misuse, domestic violence, relapses
Police logs	Domestic violence, drunken behaviour of carers, charges, proceedings
Home	All house moves with dates and addresses, including temporary moves; people moving in; homelessness, eviction; changes of placement
Social care/early help involvement	Take up, refusal, loss of support and services offered to family; positive strengths or events; initial referral and assessment; specialist assessments; allocation of workers; transfer or closure of case; conference decisions
Education	Change of schools; exclusions and prolonged absences; exam results or significant achievements; special educational needs
Health	Significant ill-health; self-harming behaviour; periods in hospital; injuries; operations; diagnoses of chronic or disabling conditions; patterns of missed appointments

5.6 Along with the ‘event details’ is a column called ‘outcome’. Clearly if an event is significant, we can see the logic of the response or what happened as a result of the incident also being significant. Some events won’t have an outcome - a child’s birth being recorded, for example. Some events will. For example:

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Outcome</i>
12-May-2015	Telephone call from mum – reporting an incident of domestic violence	Mum agreed to call police and make a statement.

6 Court chronologies

- 6.1 The principles for case file chronologies apply equally to court reports. They should be short, concise, clear and factual. They are not a record of every intervention with a family. They are not a diary. The court chronology should contain the significant events that will inform your analysis and judgement – and show the court why we want a particular decision granted.
- 6.2 Court chronologies should only cover the most recent two years (apart from the child's date of birth, if it has happened earlier). You should summarise any significant and relevant events leading up to the two most recent years. We should look to limit court chronologies to four pages, wherever possible. Remember, The *Protocol for Judicial Case Management in Public Law Children Act Cases* says: 'Social Work Chronology is a schedule containing a succinct summary of the significant dates and events in the child's life in chronological order.'
- 6.3 We should always be mindful of what we are seeking the court to do. We should know this before we write a word. So, ask yourself: how is this information helping the court to understand our decision? The evidence should only be submitted if it is relevant to the decision being sought (this will, of course, not just include evidence in support of us, but also that evidence that could be used against our decision – for example, the medical appointments that mum did keep as well as those she did not). The evidence has to be as clear as possible.

Date	Incident or sequence of incidents relevant to the child's welfare	Significance
11.08.15	Initial Assessment completed with regards to the children. Concerns were expressed with regards to the parents being able to meet the basic needs of the children and the decision was made to start a Child in Need (CIN) plan. The home conditions were described as 'appalling'.	The outcome of this was that children went to live with their paternal Grandmother
02.09.15	Strategy meeting convened due to the issues of neglect and parents' seeming inability to provide basic care to the children. Decision made to start Section 47 enquiry to progress to Initial Child Protection Conference (ICPC) on the groups of neglect. Significant information provided by Children's Centre and Health Visitor representative at that meeting.	
22/09/15	Initial Child Protection Conference was held. It was the decision of Conference	

	that all of the children should be made subject to Child Protection plans under the category of neglect.	
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6.5 The above examples are fairly typical of the type of entry we see. The entries could be shorter and more concise. The 'significance' box is only used once – and it does seem that this should be recorded as a separate incident and not as an 'outcome' (which, of course, is the title of the box in the case file chronologies). The dates are not recorded in a consistent style. The tenses vary (it's fine to use present tense). Perhaps the above could look like this:

Date	Incident or sequence of incidents relevant to the child's welfare	Significance
11.08.15	Initial Assessment raises concerns that parents are unable to meet the children's basic needs. Home conditions are assessed as 'appalling'. Children move in with maternal grandmother. Child in Need (CIN) plan is recommended.	Potential evidence of neglect.
02.09.15	Strategy meeting decides to begin a Section 47 (child protection) enquiry.	To progress case to initial child protection conference.
22.09.15	Initial Child Protection Conference decides to make the children subject to Child Protection plans under the category of neglect.	Serious and shared concerns about neglect.

6.6 We will provide more detailed practice examples of court chronologies in our guidance on writing effective court reports.

A manager's mini-guide to chronologies

*'Every child's case file should include a properly maintained chronology'
Recommendation 58 - the Victoria Climbié Inquiry*

Make sure your team all know what a child's chronology is

It's a series of 'headlines' which record, in date order, the significant events and changes in a child or young person's life. It gives an immediate, visual overview.

And what it isn't ... a blow-by-blow account, everyday observations, an assessment, a running log, a daily diary, or a list of professional interventions.

Understand why we need to do a chronology

It is a quick, effective way to see what is happening in the life of a child or young person. It helps identify patterns and issues – and helps to assess risks. Chronologies should be used at all planning and review meetings; and for life story work.

Make sure your team know how to record a chronology

Most entries should be kept to one line only: '13 November 2012 - Scott moved to Chicksands School.' Make sure your staff record neutrally: '14 November 2012 - Informed by police of an alleged assault on mother by father.' Make sure they stick to facts – no comment, no opinion.

Make sure they know what to include

They should only consider stuff that has a significant impact on the child. They need assurance to use their professional judgment. But as a guide...

Changes: carer, address, legal status, school, household members **Incidents:** injuries however caused, exam results, school exclusions, the victim or perpetrator of bullying or gender or culture, missed appointments, arrests.

Family or health: domestic violence, separation/loss, financial problems, imprisonment, substance misuse, serious illness, hospitalisation, homelessness.

Our work with the child: referrals and source, services offered with outcome, Section 47 enquiries, plans, looked after episodes.

Significant information from partner services: such as children's centres, adult services, police, education and so on.