

Working Together Agreements Practice Guidance

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# Introduction

This is a guide to the effective use of Working Together Agreements (also known as Written Agreements)**.** Its purpose is to explain what they are, outline the current context where practitioners are using Written Agreements and the circumstances where an alternative of a Working Together Agreement should be used more effectively to work with parents or carers and other family members.

**The Current Context - Difficulties with Written Agreements being used outside the PLO process**

Over time, the notion of Written Agreements between social workers and parents/carers have become an accepted part of the social work tool kit. Written Agreements have often been used in many different circumstances and **remain necessary during the pre-proceedings process**, when Social Workers need to formally clarify the expectations of parents/carers in relation to keeping children safe and enabling them to remain in their care. These are usually used in parallel with wider safety plans.

When used well, they can provide clear communication to parents or carers about what action(s) they are expected to take in relation to the care of their children. They also involve collaboration and should also include support provided by Children and Young People’s Services (CYPS) towards achieving a desired outcome. They have often been used when dealing with families where there are concerns around immediate safety to a child e.g., following a s.47, agreeing contact (family time) between Looked After Children and their families, or within domestic abuse situations, where there is a serious risk of harm. Social workers have a duty to form judgements about risk in the future and the likelihood of change.

However, whilst Written Agreements have been used successfully, research suggests they are too often relied upon to safeguard children in a range of situations. Serious Case Reviews / Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews, Local Government Association peer reviews, Joint Targeted Area Inspections and legal judgments have all been criticised by the over-use of Written Agreements and reliance upon them as a reassurance of a child’s safety. In Kent, we know through the audit process that Social Workers continue to use Written Agreements which are often inconsistent in the content, quality, and effectiveness. They are often written with non-specific expectations and which do not identify timescales, review dates and sometimes without signatures, meaning they offer little safety to the child.

We know that poorly considered Written Agreements:

* Can place responsibility for managing the risk to children with the victim or make them responsible for policing the behaviour of the perpetrator where practitioners are working with domestic abuse.

This leads to the potential of written agreements being:

* Victim blaming.
* Providing no guarantees of safety for a child. Only the actions of parents and professionals can keep children safe.
* Being ineffective in reducing domestic violence incidents or indeed reducing risk. (Ofsted 2018)

A Written Agreement is **not** a legal document but can be provided in supporting evidence if applications are later made to the court.

In light of the above concerns, it is proposed that that Written Agreements (used outside of the pre-proceedings process) are reconsidered and renamed by practitioners as Working Together Agreements.

Working Together Agreements are a more effective option and should reflect the concerns that exist for the child and family and the plan for the child. A Working Together Agreement needs to have a consistent format which clearly lays out a family agreed/designed specific set of rules and arrangements that describes how the family will go about and live its everyday life. It should be a document that shows everyone – the professionals, the family’s own supporting safety people, and the children – and will show that the children will be safe in the future.

The most important aspect of safety planning is that the Working Together Agreement **is co-created with the child, family and wider safety network**, working together to keep the child safe. It is vital that the plan is monitored and refined carefully over time and the commitments of the plan are made and owned by the parents and/or carers in front of their children, family, and wider safety network. This may not be something that can be done in one or two meetings and a Working Together Agreement that will last, most certainly cannot be created by professionals alone deciding on the rules and then trying to impose them on the family. Meaningful Working Together Agreementsare created out of a sustained and often a challenging journey undertaken by the family together **with** the professionals involved, focused on the most challenging question that can be asked in child protection: **What specifically do we need to see to be satisfied this child is safe?** A Working Together Agreement, Thereforeis best thought of as journey and not the a product.

A Working Together Agreement can be used at any stage, where change is needed, and the safety of the child needs to be prioritised. They can be used within early interventions or statutory social work interventions. It is a professional judgement whether to use a Working Together Agreementand they should be endorsed and signed by a Team Manager and uploaded to Liberi. To be effective, any Working Together Agreement must be carefully drawn up (see example and template).

# Good Practice when using a Working Together Agreement

* Individual family members and professionals **are** fully involved. Be honest and respectful. Try to engage rather than alienate the parents.
* They should be produced with parents who are equally committed to changing their behaviour. Providing parents with a genuine opportunity to demonstrate that they can care for their children in ways that will satisfy professionals.
* Once drafted, the Working Together Agreement should be handed personally to the parent or carer with time spent revisiting the plan.
* The grounds for concern should be explicit, specifically identifying the risk of harm. Do not use words such as unhygienic, dirty, inappropriate.
* Be clear about the seriousness of the matter. Provide sufficient detail to inform the parents the family and professional about the concerns but be succinct.
* State the “bottom line” and what is/is not negotiable. Explain what you need to see to be satisfied that the child will be safe in their own family? Working together with the parents, children and networks of their friends and family to answer this question.
* Ensure it is written clearly, in plain language, is jargon free and avoid abbreviations. Consider whether it needs to be produced in a different format to meet the needs of the family.
* Ensure both the professionals and the family members are clear about the intended outcomes and that the outcomes are realistic
* The Working Together Agreement should be underpinned by a thorough assessment that is clear about risk and protective factors of all relevant adults and family members.
* Ensure the Working Together Agreement gives information about what support will be provided to the family to support them achieve the outcomes.
* Be clear about how progress will be measured and what will happen next if the concerns are not addressed.
* Timescales should be reasonably short as work should be on-going to improve the position or escalate intervention where required.
* Kept “live” (including with other professionals) by being referred to at visits, CIN/CIC Reviews and Core Groups. A clear review date should be set within a specified timeframe (i.e., a month).
* It is important that other professionals involved are aware of (if not involved in producing) the Working Together Agreement and professionals should be sent a copy (with parents agreement).
* The content of the Working Together Agreement is monitored in practitioner’s supervision to ensure that the focus remains on the child’s safeguarding needs.
* Professionals need to be assured that parents genuinely understand the agreement**.** The person must have the [**capacity**](http://www.proceduresonline.com/resources/glossary-cs/) to enter into and consent to the plan or agreement. Legal advice should be sought if there is any doubt about a person’s capacity. (See also [**Mental Capacity Guidance**](http://www.proceduresonline.com/resources/cs_mca/)).
* Working Together Agreements should never be a substitute for other formal processes or plans, however can be used to support the reduction of risk and harm

# Involving Children and Young people

Whilst the Working Together Agreementwill be created predominantly by parents**,** their supporting network, Social Workers, and other professional’s, consideration needs to be given to discussing and adapting the agreement into a words and pictures format which children and young people can easily understand. There is a tendency for professionals to significantly dilute the seriousness of the situation when communicating with children. This is patronising to children and young people who have usually been in the middle of the problems and need to make sense of what they have experienced. It also tends to increase the secrecy and the silence around the maltreatment.

Learning to create explanations and agreements together with parents that are age appropriate and capture the issues, without trivialising or minimising the seriousness of the child protection concerns is the core skill of putting children in the centre of the safety planning and the details. (See Child Safety Plan example – appendix A)

## Developing the detail

Working Together Agreements are formal documents.

The layout should be as follows:

* They should be formatted with the KCC Logo at the top.
* They should include: ‘this is a Working Together Agreement for [child’s name] detail who it was created by and dated’
* The reason for and aims of the Working Together Agreement should be stated.
* It needs to state clearly to parents/carers that the Local Authority want to work with parentsand howto achieve the best possible solutions.
* A clear review date should be set within a specified timeframe (i.e., a month).
* Contingencies should be clearly stated
* The Working Together Agreement should end with a list of the names and titles of those who are party to it, signatures and with date agreement was made.
* Working Together Agreements should be clear, concise, and not too long.

(See Example and Template – appendix B)

**Does it matter if it is not actually signed?**

Participants should sign the Working Together Agreement to show that they agree to adhere to it. Signatories must be all the adults involved, plus the social worker and Team Manager.

**Where does it go in the records?**

The signed copy should be uploaded to Liberi/Documents and a clear case note recorded to indicate a Working Together Agreement has been created and the reason(s) why.

 **Who gets a copy of the Agreement?**

Everyone who has signed it. Family members may choose to share it with their solicitor or advocate if they are involved. Working Together Agreements should be shared with other professionals, where appropriate, and it should state which professionals have received a copy.

**What happens if someone doesn’t do what they agreed to do?**

The effectiveness of Working Together Agreements is undermined if families breach them repeatedly. Consequences/Next Steps should be written into the Working Together Agreement from the beginning. If there is non-compliance by any party, it should be openly discussed, and next steps decided. The Working Together Agreement may need to be adjusted and/or other action required.

Christine Stanbridge 14.7.21

**References**

[Effective written agreements - Ofsted: developments in children’s social care (blog.gov.uk)](https://socialcareinspection.blog.gov.uk/2018/01/23/effective-written-agreements/)

# Appendix A

# This is Jack and Katie’s Safety Plan to show everyone that they will be safe at home with [parents name/s]

Mummy and daddy will have a list of things to do each day ****to make sure that Jack and Katie have enough to eat, are clean**,** have clean clothes, clean beds, a clean home to live in and get to school on time.****Susan, (SW) will also come to the house and talk with Rachel, Paul, Katie, and Jack about ways in which they can continue with these good routines every day and learn to keep their bodies clean.****

Mummy will call Grandma Sandra, Nicki and Grandpa Joe every day after tea to tell them what she and daddy have done from the list.

Grandma Sandra, Nicki or Grandpa Joe will visit every day to make sure that the house is calm, and mummy and daddy have not been drinking or taking drugs . They will also come for their tea one night a week to help mummy and daddy with reading their letters/emails and put important dates on the calendar such as Katie’s medical appointments and Jack’s parent/teacher meetings. Grandma Sandra, Grandpa Joe and Nicki will write them down too then they can go with mummy or daddy.If they are worried, they will call SW Susan or the Police in an emergency.

 Jack, Katie and mummy and daddy will go to Grandma Sandra’s and Grandpa Joe’s every Sunday for lunch  so they can hear all about the good things which have happened this week and, they can help mummy write her list for the week.  ****

If mummy or daddy, Grandma Sandra, Grandpa Joe or Nicki are worried that mummy and daddy are finding it hard to do all the things they need to do each day, Grandma Sandra, Grandpa Joe and Nicki will make a rota and one of them will come round and help them with what to do. **. This will include taking Jack and Katie to school.

Grandma Sandra, Grandpa Joe, Nicki, and Teachers Miss Simon and Mr Mitchell have all said they will help. Grandma Sandra and Grandpa Joe and Nicki can pop round every day to see whether everything is Ok. They can write their names on the calendar with the time they are coming. 

Jack and Katie will tell Grandma Sandra, Grandpa Joe, and Nicki if they are worried or upset and they will bring a toy into school to let Miss Simon and Mr Mitchell know they are worried or upset The teachers will make sure their worries get sorted out. The teachers will use 1 breaktime a week to chat to Jack and Katie.

The family plan has been made forDaddy to leave the family home.  and find somewhere else to live. When this happens, Jack and Katie can visit him. Until Daddy moves out and finds another home, if arguments start and Mummy and daddy are really stressed and shouting at each other one of them will leave the house and cool down (either going to Grandma Sandra and Grandpa Joe’s house or Nicki’s house. One adult must always stay at home with Jack and Katie (or take them with them) to make sure Jack and Katie are safe.

Mummy and Daddy understand that if there are any arguments between them which get aggressive, in front of Jack and Katie, the Police  need to be contacted immediately. Jack and Katie have suggested that they call the Police for help in an emergency and know they can do this without being told off by their parents.

Jack and Katie will also tell Grandma Sandra and Grandpa Joe or Nicki immediately if they are worried about their mum being very sad parents fighting, taking drugs and/or drinking alcohol – they will ring or text them. Grandma Sandra, Grandpa Joe or Nicki will come round to the house straight away and work out by talking to mummy and daddy if it’s safe for them to stay at home or whether they need to take Jack and Katie to their house to sleep over . Grandma Sandra and Grandpa Joe or Nicki will talk to mummy and daddy before Jack and Katie go home to make sure mummy and daddy are calm and ready to have them back. 

Mummy and Daddy really love Jack and Katie and they want you both to be happy and well cared for. Mummy and Daddy have said they want to stop fighting and arguing and using drugs and ‘drink’ when things aren’t going well. With the help from professionals,  Mummy and Daddy have both agreed to talk to people who can help them  make changes and as they want life at home to be better for Jack and Katie.

We will all meet again on……  when Jack, Katie, Mummy and, Daddy, Grandpa Joe, Grandma Sandra, Niki and all the professionals can share Mummy and Daddy’s progress and achievements.

# Appendix B

# **Example of a Working Together Agreement for [child’s name]**

This Working Together Agreement has been created by Paul and Rachel, Jack and Katie and their family and professional support network to plan what everyone needs to do on a day to-day basis, to make sure that the child/ren are safe and to support them in remaining in the care of the family. The Working Together Agreement includes the details of how everyone will know that the agreement is working and that the child/ren is/are safe. It will also include what will happen if there are any worries or problems with what has been agreed.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **WHAT [name of social worker/professional] IS/ARE WORRIED ABOUT?** | **WHAT WE AGREE [parents and children name] SHOULD DO** | **SUPPORT FOR YOU*****Who will help?******How will it help?*** | **WHAT WE NEED TO SEE TO KNOW THAT [CHILD’S NAME] IS SAFE** |
| **E.G** Jack and Katie, we worry that there are arguments swearing and shouting within your home. You have said that you do not feel safe at home, at times you feel frightened, and you get upset seeing and hearing the fights that occur.  | **E.G**The family plan has been made for **Paul to leave the family home.** Paul and Rachel have been honest about how arguments and fights often start. Until Paul moves out and finds another home, both parents have agreed that if they notice tensions at home are rising, one adult **will** leave the house and cool down (either going to Grandma Sandra and Grandpa Joe’s house or Nicki’s house). They agree that one adult must always remain at home with the children (or take them with them) to make sure Jack and Katie are safe.In order to help Rachel, understand that impact of the abuse she and the children have experienced she will contact the Freedom Programme facilitators and ask for advice on starting the course by 10.01.22.Paul and Rachel understand that if there are any arguments between them which they don’t manage to diffuse and which get aggressive, in front of Jack and Katie, **the Police need to be contacted immediately**. Jack and Katie have suggested that they call the Police for help in an emergency and know they can do this without being told off by their parents.Jack and Katie will also tell Grandma Sandra and Grandpa Joe or Nicki **immediately** if they are worried about their parents fighting, taking drugs/drinking alcohol – they will ring/text them and Grandma Sandra, Grandpa Joe will collect them. Jack and Katie will also bring a toy into school to let Miss Simon and Mr. Mitchell know they are worried and need to talk.Rachel will speak to Grandma Sandra, Grandpa Joe and Nicki each day, after tea to tell them what she and Paul have completed from the list. Paul will speak to housing organisations with a view to gaining his own home, so that Jack and Katie can visit and stay at his home. Jack, Katie, Rachel and Paul will go to Grandma Sandra’s and Grandpa Joe’s every Sunday for lunch so they can hear all about the good things which have happened, and they can help mummy and daddy with their chore list for the week. Rachel and Paul will make sure that Jack and Katie go to school every day on time unless they are unwell and will ask for help from Nicki and Grandpa Joe to help getting the children to school if Rachel is feeling unwell or depressed.  | **E.G****During the friends and family meeting** Rachel told Grandma Sandra, Grandpa Joe and Nicki what the concerns are. Between them, they have drawn up a rota and either Grandma Sandra, Grandpa Joe or Nicki will visit every day to check the house is calm and free from arguments, Rachel and Paul are not under the influence of drink and drugs and they feel they are coping well and the house is safe and warm. If they are worried, they will call SW Susan Taylor or the Police in an emergency.Grandma Sandra, Grandpa Joe or Nicki will come round to the house straight away if there is an argument and work out whether they need to take Jack and Katie to their house. Grandma Sandra, Grandpa Joe and/or Nicki will return the children home, once they have spoken with Rachel and Paul and are satisfied, both parents are calm, and it is safe for the children to return home.SW, Susan Taylor to contact housing and establish what support Paul needs to be rehoused in order to support his application. Supporting Paul in this way will assist Paul to separate from Rachel, which will lessen the fights the children witness. SW Susan Taylor will contact the Freedom Programme facilitators to check Rachel’s progress.Miss Simon and Mr Mitchell will talk to Jack and Katie during one breaktime a week about the good things that have happened that week as well as listening to any worries the children have. They will carefully look out for when Jack and Katie bring any toys to school, meaning they want to talk and make sure they are given time. | **E.G** Jack and Katie, you need to be living in a home whereby you always feel safe and secure. It is important that mum and dad don’t fight and hurt each other.You are both at a young age and need to be surrounded by adults who you have positive relationships with and who continue to be kind and considerate so that you continue to become kind and considerate adults yourselves. Jack and Katie, your mum and dad really love you and are trying hard to make things better. They have made a plan, with the help of professionals because they want you to be happy and well cared for. They will all help to make sure the plan is working and will work together to make sure this happens during the next few months.We will all meet again on %%% when you, mum, dad, Grandpa Joe, Grandma Sandra, Niki and all the professionals can share mum and dad’s progress and achievements. |

**This Agreement has been sent to:**   **Date for Review : \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

[Social Worker’s name] would like to work alongside you to keep [name of child] safe. This Working Together Agreement will last for [no. of days] and be reviewed by no later than [date]. Paul and Rachel, Jack and Katie and their family and professional support network will all be involved in thinking about how the plan is working. If anyone wants to discuss the plan the please contact [Social Worker’s name] on ………..

**Bottom lines:**

If *[name of parent / carer]* fails to keep to this agreement, it may be necessary for the Local Authority to convene an urgent meeting to include [parents’ names/carers names] and all professionals, to discuss the issues or concerns identified. Consideration will be given to initiating a Child Protection Case Conference to make the plan more formal or seek legal advice in relation to the safety and wellbeing of *[name of child].*

Signed: Parent[s], Grandma Sandra, Grandpa Joe and Nicki, social worker, team manager

Date: