

Resolution of professional disagreements in multi-agency working to safeguard children

Approving Committee	Executive Group - Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership
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To be read in conjunction with	<p>This policy should be read in line with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Effective Support for Families in Merton, including MSCP Indicators of Possible Need • London Child Protection Procedures

“Safeguarding partners and relevant agencies must act in accordance with the arrangements for their area and will be expected to understand each other’s differences of views and resolve such differences locally.”¹

1. Introduction

1.1. **Differences of professional opinion** arise in safeguarding when professionals deem decisions not to be in the best interests of the child/children. Professional disagreements may occur around:

- Levels of need and intervention-differing opinions about thresholds
- Lack of understanding about roles and responsibilities
- Disagreement regarding decision making and action to be taken
- Concern about the non-action of another professional
- Concern there is a drift or unreasonable delay in progressing a case.
- Disagreement over the provision of services

1.2. Professional disagreements can negatively impact on positive working relationships and consequently on the ability to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and families. **Professional disagreements always require resolution.** They are only dysfunctional if not resolved in a constructive and timely fashion.

1.3. **Escalation** is a process of challenging a decision made by another professional or organisation. Problem resolution is an integral part of multi-agency working to safeguard children. This may be applied to isolated issues, including non-case issues, or incidents as well as any intractable recurring ones.

¹ [Working together to safeguard children 2023: statutory guidance \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

2. **Headline Messages**

- 2.1. **The safety of individual children is the paramount** consideration in any professional disagreement. Concerns should be addressed with due consideration to the risks for the child.
- 2.2. **All professionals should feel able to challenge decision-making**, in order to safeguard the child and to promote effective multi-agency safeguarding practice.

Key Principles to follow in managing professional disagreements and escalations:

1. Keep the focus on what is in the child's best interests at all times.
2. Share the key information, interpretation, and assessment appropriately and what may be the likely impact on the child.
3. Clear transparency between organisations on decisions made and how they have been reached.
4. Seek to resolve the issue in a timely way between practitioners in the first instance.
5. Ensure professional disagreements do not get in the way of meeting the needs of the child (e.g., by delaying decision-making).
6. Liaise with the lead professionals and safeguarding or child protection designates in the respective organisations at the earliest opportunity (see contact list below on page 6).
7. Ensure there is accurate record made of the agreed actions of each agency at each stage of the escalation process, and this is fed back to practitioners involved immediately.
8. Consider a joint reflective discussion to help resolve disputes.
9. The child's existing plan and decisions associated with it should continue to be followed while the escalation is resolved as quickly as possible.

3. **Aims and Objectives**

- 3.1. The aims of this policy are to provide a clear and transparent way for professionals to resolve disputes between agencies quickly and effectively. Effective multi-agency working is dependent on an open approach and respectful relationship between partners.
- 3.2. This policy does not override professional/clinical, or subject matter expertise and decision making. **If there are significant concerns for a child's welfare at any stage of this process without clear resolution, then the MSCP Executive must be informed immediately via MertonSCP@merton.gov.uk.**
- 3.3. This policy does not apply to cases where there may be concerns about the behaviour or conduct of another professional that may impact on a child's safety and well-being. In such cases, reference should be made to the agency's own Whistleblowing Policy and the [Local Authority's Designate Officer](#) (LADO) via LADO@merton.gov.uk.

4. MSCP Multi-Agency Escalation Policy

- 4.1. Professionals providing services to children and their families should work cooperatively across all agencies, using their skills and experience to make a robust contribution to safeguarding children and promoting their welfare within the framework of discussions, meetings, conferences and case management.
- 4.2. All agencies are responsible for ensuring that their staff are competent and supported to escalate appropriate intra-agency concerns and disagreements about a child's well-being.
- 4.3. Any worker who feels that a professional decision is not safe or is inappropriate should initially seek safeguarding supervision with their line manager, and Safeguarding lead where relevant, to:
 - Clarify their thinking in order to identify the problem.
 - Be specific as to what the concern is about; and what they aim to achieve.
 - Evidence the nature and source of their concerns.
 - Keep a record of all discussions.
 - Assist with the next stage of the process (detailed in section 5).

It may be useful for individuals to de-brief following some disputes in order to promote continuing good working relationships.

5. Lines of escalation – four stages

- 5.1. This process, and the timescales outlined, should be followed unless the child faces significant risk of harm if resolution is delayed. **If you believe a child is at immediate risk of harm, you should call 999.**
- 5.2. Depending on the urgency or matter, an individual may choose to initiate the process at a later stage. If so, the reason for doing this should be clearly articulated. Examples of this could be:
 - A resource issue where you are aware (from the partner you wish to raise the escalation against) that the decision maker to access that resource sits at a later stage.
 - Where you are confident that relevant person in an escalation stage has been heavily involved in the attempts to resolve the issue informally.
- 5.3. Escalations through the stages must be made with the consent of the corresponding person in the policy. For example, an escalation from children's social care to Police at Stage four, can only be made with the consent from the Director of Children's Services.
- 5.4. Initial resolution should be sought at the practitioner / line manager level between agencies. If professional agreement cannot be reached, then the concern should be escalated using this staged approach:
 - **Informal:** this must happen first and needs to be between the teams and involving first line managers.

- **Stage One:** Next Line Manager / Supervisor (i.e., service manager, Detective Sergeant).
 - **Stage Two:** Agency Safeguarding Lead / Senior Manager (i.e., Head of Service, Designate Lead for Safeguarding, Headteacher, Detective Inspector) – see details in table 1 on page 6
 - **Stage Three:** Senior MSCP representative for agency (copied to MSCP) (i.e., Director, Detective Chief Inspector) – see details in table 2 on page 7
 - **Stage Four:** MSCP Executive Group (submitted to MSCP) (i.e. three statutory partner representatives or school governing body, detailed in table 2, with support from Independent Person).
 - A resolution panel may be convened.
- 5.5. Contacts for Agency Safeguarding Leads / Senior Managers and MSCP representatives are provided below (see table under 8.4). Depending on agency structures, some smaller agencies may have the same person named at different levels. When raising an escalation with an agency where this is the case, if the matter is not resolved, you would then progress to the stage above that named person.
- 5.6. Where appropriate, consider involving the commissioner of the service alongside the relevant service lead.
- 5.7. Stage 1, 2, 3 & 4 are all formal stages of the escalation process and should be responded to **within 3 working days, or as soon as possible if deemed necessary based on the child's best interests**. It is important to note that the response might be a proposed pathway to seeking resolution, for example, convening a reflective meeting within 5 days. It will be up to the agency raising the escalation if they accept this.
- 5.8. All agencies should make every effort to resolve the disagreement as soon as possible. An escalation should not be raised higher than one progressive stage, unless there is a belief the safety and welfare of a child may be placed at increased risk of significant harm by not taking higher level action more immediately.

6. Resolution

- 6.1. Disagreements should be resolved at the lowest possible stage. At Stage 4, the MSCP Executive may choose to convene a Resolution Panel. The panel will consist of Safeguarding Children Partnership Executive representatives from the three statutory agencies and all agencies concerned in the professional disagreement. It should be chaired by an independent person.
- 6.2. Attempts at problem resolution may leave one worker/agency believing that the child/ren remain at risk of significant harm. This person/agency has responsibility for communicating such concerns, using the stages outlined in this policy.

7. Recording & Feedback

- 7.1. Each agency will keep a record at all stages, by all parties. In particular this must include written confirmation between the parties about an agreed outcome of the disagreement and how any outstanding issues will be pursued. Interagency conversations and outcomes should be included in the child's record on the systems used by each agency involved.
- 7.2. When the issue is resolved, any general issues should be identified and referred to the agency's representative on the MSCP for consideration by the relevant MSCP Sub-Group to inform future learning and possible changes to existing policies and procedures.
- 7.3. At each stage it is important that the person who originally raised the concern is given feedback on what action has been taken in response. It is the responsibility of the person to whom the issue is referred to ensure that clear and timely feedback is provided.

8. Who should be involved?

- 8.1. **Prior to beginning formal escalation**, discussion and attempts to resolve should be between front line workers involved, with support from their line managers where applicable. This **informal stage** must take place before any formal escalation (see flowchart on page 8).
- 8.2. **At Stage 1 of multi-agency escalation**, the professionals involved in the dispute should contact their next line manager to consider the issues raised, what outcome they would like to achieve and how differences can be resolved. The frontline or service managers should then contact each other to try to negotiate a settlement to the dispute within 3 working days.
- 8.3. **At Stage 2 of multi-agency escalation**, the line managers should escalate the concerns to the named safeguarding leads / senior managers within their agency, who should attempt to resolve.
- 8.4. Details of named leads for each agency are provided on the next page in Table 1.

Table 1 – Stage 2 - Named Leads	
Agency	Named Lead role
Please contact MSCP via MertonSCP@merton.gov.uk or 020 8545 4866 if you require contact details for any of the below named leads.	
Central London Community Healthcare NHS Trust (Merton)	Named Nurse Safeguarding Children
Catch 22 Risk & Resilience (commissioned service)	Service Manager
	London Borough of Merton Commissioning Manger
Clarion Housing	Head of Housing
Clear Springs (Home Office accommodation provider)	To be confirmed
Epsom St Helier	Lead Nurse Safeguarding Children and Young People
London Borough of Merton (LBM) – Children’s Social Care	Director for Children’s Social Care & Youth Inclusion
LBM – Education & Early Help	Director for Education & Early Help
LBM – Adult Social Care	Director for Adult Social Care
LBM – Housing	Head of Housing Needs & Strategy
LBM – Community Safety	Head of Community Safety
LBM – Public Health	Consultant in Public Health (Children’s Lead) (Interim)
MET Police – South-West Basic Command Unit	Detective Chief Inspector, SW BCU Public Protection Hub
Merton Connected	Head of Development and Volunteering
Probation	Head of Service Wandsworth, Merton and Sutton PDU
Schools / education providers	Headteacher or Designated Safeguarding Lead
South-West London Integrated Care Board	Designate Nurse for Safeguarding Children (Merton)
South-West London Integrated Care Board	Designated Nurse Looked After Children (Merton)
South-West London Integrated Care Board	Designated Doctor Safeguarding Children (Merton)
South-West London Integrated Care Board	Named GP for Safeguarding (Merton)
St George's University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust	Named Nurse for Safeguarding Children (Acute)
SWL St George's Mental Health Trust including CAMHS	Named Professional/Nurse for Safeguarding Children
Other organisations including voluntary, community and faith	Safeguarding lead / senior manager

- 8.5. **At Stage 3 of multi-agency escalation**, the designate safeguarding leads / senior managers should escalate the concerns to the relevant MSCP Executive Group representatives, who should attempt to resolve.
- 8.6. Non-statutory agencies should report to the relevant MSCP Executive Group Lead for this area of work (i.e., a health provider should escalate to the Integrated Care Board’s MSCP Executive Group lead) but will likely want to include an equivalent senior lead from their own organisation. Please contact MertonSCP@merton.gov.uk if you would like further advice.
- 8.7. An updated MSCP Escalation Form should be copied to the MSCP via MertonSCP@merton.gov.uk. Details of the MSCP Executive Group representatives for each of the three statutory agencies and the fourth partner for education are provided below - [please refer to the MSCP website for up-to-date contact details](#).

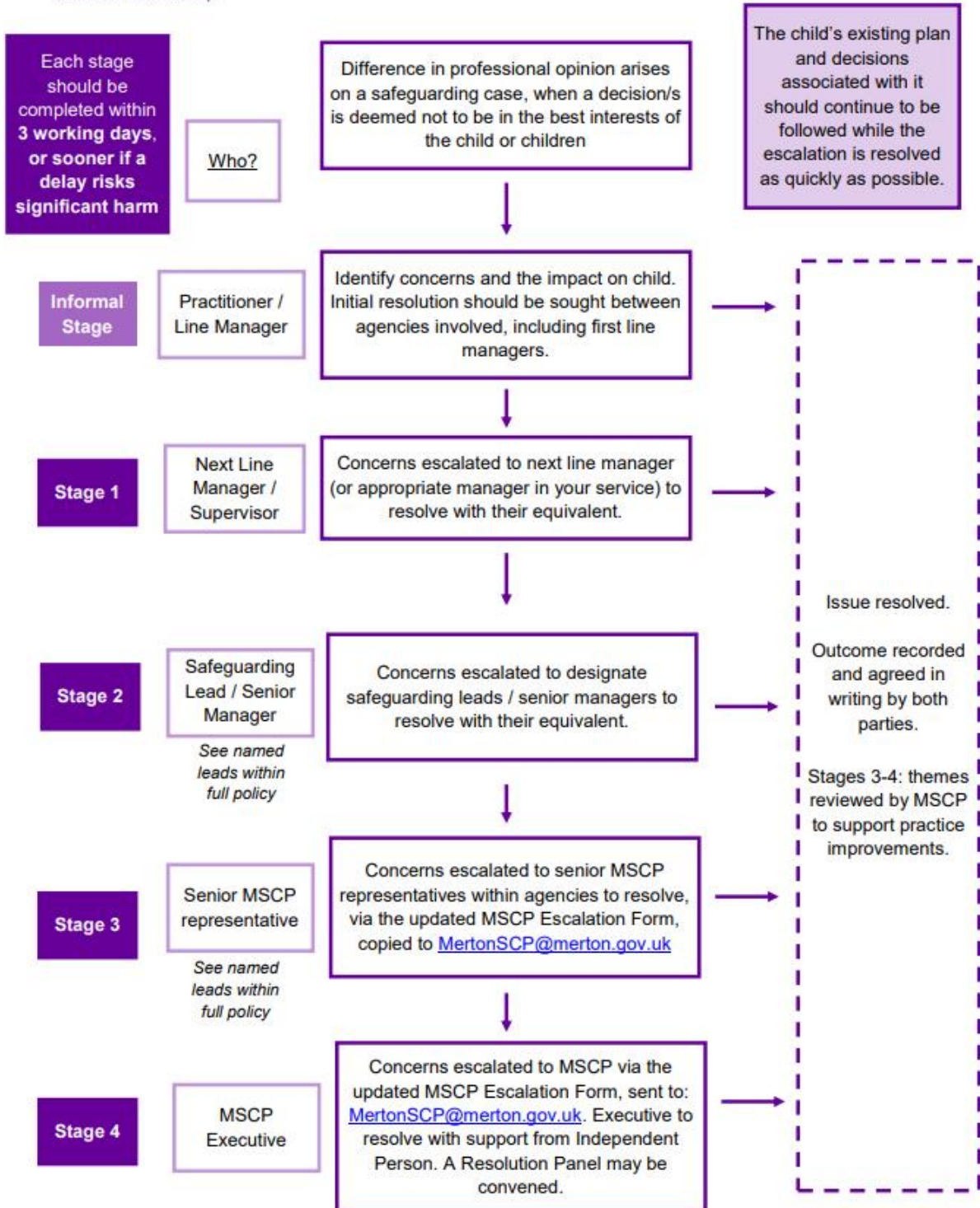
Table 2 – Stage 3 Named Leads	
Agency	MSCP Executive Group Lead
Police	Head of Safeguarding, Public Protection South West BCU, Metropolitan Police Service
Health - Integrated Care Board	Director of Quality South West London Integrated Care Board
Local Authority	Executive Director of Children, Lifelong Learning and Families London Borough of Merton
Education	Chair of Governing Board (who will liaise with Headteacher Exec representative where appropriate)

- 8.8. **At Stage 4 of multi-agency escalation**, the relevant MSCP Executive Group representatives (detailed above in Table 2) should escalate the concerns for resolution by the MSCP Executive Group. An updated MSCP Escalation Form should be submitted to: MertonSCP@merton.gov.uk. The MSCP Executive should resolve with support from Independent Person and other relevant senior leaders. This will include establishing if a **Resolution Panel** needs to be convened to support the final decision.



Merton Safeguarding Children Partnership Escalation Flowchart

MertonSCP@merton.gov.uk



MSCP Multi-Agency Escalation Form

(Copy to be kept on service user file held by all agencies involved)

**This form should be completed for all Stage 3 and 4 multi-agency escalations.
Please update this form at each stage of escalation.**

Please send the completed form via secure email to: MertonSCP@merton.gov.uk

Initials of child/young person:		
Case identifier (if relevant):		
Form completed by:	Name	
	Role	
	Agency	
	Email	
	Telephone	
Date form submitted:		
Details of other agencies involved:		
Details of the professional disagreement:	<i>Please provide a brief overview.</i>	
How have you attempted to resolve and what was the outcome?		
Stage of multi-agency escalation requested:	Stage 3 (Agency Senior MSCP representative)	
Desired outcome of escalation for the child / children / family:	<i>Please include details of what you intend to happen as a result of this challenge.</i>	

What is the learning for your agencies from this case?
Is there learning for the wider safeguarding partnership?
<i>Please provide any suggestions of actions for the MSCP (i.e., new/refreshed multi-agency guidance, training need etc.)</i>
Any other comments?

Please send the completed form via secure email to: MertonSCP@merton.gov.uk

<i>For completion by MSCP Business Support Unit only:</i>	
Date received:	
MSCP Escalation Case Reference:	