

Jersey's Children First

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Additional Practice Guidance for Single and Multi-Agency Child Chronologies

Approval Route

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Jersey’s Children First, Guidance for Single and Multi-Agency Chronologies.

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To be read in conjunction with the *Jersey Children First* Guidance for all those Working with Children and Young People, with Tools, Templates and Supporting Documents, Section B: 18 The Child's Chronology of Significant Events.

Introduction – Single and Multi-Agency Chronologies

Significant developments in approaches to multi-disciplinary working and service delivery have had an impact on how chronologies should be prepared and applied. For example, the implementation of *Jersey's Children First* means that the chronology is important not just in social work practice, but amongst a wider range of practitioners, including health visitors and teachers.

The essential purpose of the chronology is to draw together important information and aid understanding, highlighting early indications of emerging patterns of concern and recognising what factors may be making a difference when things are going well. We recognise both the distinction, as well as the complex relationship, between assessment and chronology. This is not a 'how to assess' guide, but a recognition of the role of chronologies as part of assessment.

This guide draws on a range of findings as well as those of different agencies, including the former Social Work Inspection Agency (SWIA). It includes practice examples from other UK published reports.

Chronologies: definition and purpose

For work with children and families, a shared definition of a chronology is as follows.

'Chronologies provide a key link in the chain of understanding needs/risks, including the need for protection from harm. Setting out key events in sequential date order, they give a summary timeline of child and family circumstances, patterns of behaviour and trends in lifestyle that may greatly assist any assessment and analysis. They are a logical, methodical and systematic means of organising, merging and helping make sense of information. They also help to highlight gaps and omitted details that require further exploration, investigation and assessment'.

Within this definition, chronologies can be compiled and used on a single or multi-agency basis and be developed to assist in current and ongoing assessment and risk management, or as an aid to reviews of past events. Despite being applied to a range of situations with different focus and purpose, the basic approach is essentially the same. The various approaches we describe in this guide can be applied to a range of situations, unless specifically stated otherwise.

In this guide, we explore nine key characteristics of a chronology that should mean it is:

- a useful tool in assessment and practice
- not an assessment, but part of assessment
- not an end in itself, rather a working tool which promotes engagement with people who use services
- accurate and relies on good, up-to-date case recording
- detailed enough but does not substitute for recording in the file

- flexible so that detail collected may be increased if risk increases
- reviewed and analysed – a chronology which is not reviewed regularly is of limited relevance
- constructed differently according to different applications, for example current work and examining historical events
- recognising that single-agency and multi-agency chronologies set different demands and expectations.

Why are chronologies useful to practitioners and managers?

In working to improve practice that protects and enhances the lives of vulnerable children, young people and adults, one of the main issues for practitioners has been the concept of risk. This guide does not explore the wider aspects of risk assessment in any detail, but it does focus on chronologies - a single important aspect of that process. A chronology is not an assessment, or an end in itself. It is a tool that practitioners in a range of disciplines can use to help them understand what is happening in the life of a child or adult. It is not a substitute for case recording.

Chronologies in services for children and young people

Jersey's Children First provides the core to policy and practice affecting children, young people and their families in Jersey. *Jersey's Children First* provides a foundation for identifying concerns, assessing strengths, needs and any initial risks and making plans for children in all situations. *Jersey's Children First Practice Framework* emphasises the need for all agencies to collaborate in assessing and analysing family circumstances together when needed.

This means:

Each agency involved with a child and their family should collate key information into a single agency chronology of contact and where working with partner agencies actively work to combine and consolidate this into a multi-agency chronology.

In relation to this last point, the Lead Worker where one is in place can collate the information from services involved with the child, and combine them into an integrated chronology. Ideally, this should be held electronically and shared with all Team around the Child members, in accordance with applicable legislation and agencies' information sharing guidance and protocol. **Please note a multi-agency child's chronology is not a replacement for direct discussion and routine information sharing between practitioners either intra or inter-agency.**

Examples of inquiries which have promoted the importance of chronologies

For the most part, inquiries into the circumstances surrounding serious child abuse have drawn attention to the importance of chronologies.

The **Jay Report (2014)** on child sexual exploitation in Rotherham found that there was a chronology in fewer than half the cases looked at (43%) where it would have been appropriate to have one. Most chronologies were out of date, with significant gaps. Professor Jay concluded that: '...It is likely that the absence of structured chronologies contributed to key information being missed when decisions were made'.

Lord Laming, in his report into the death of **Victoria Climbié (2004)** was unequivocal in stating: 'I regard the inclusion in any case file of a clear, comprehensive and up-to-date chronology as absolutely essential'.

Children's Social Work Improvement Board 2018 has included in the improvement plan a requirement that all children being allocated to a social worker through MASH will have a summary chronology completed as part of the MASH enquiry.

The Chronology: Eight Things to Consider

1. The chronology as a tool in assessment and practice

Many practitioners have asked: 'do we need chronologies for every person we are working with?' As stated above, *Jersey's Children First* sets out an expectation that, as a basic requirement, each agency involved with a child and their family will collate key information into a single-agency chronology.

There are five key elements to compiling all chronologies.

Compiling a chronology

- deciding on the purpose of compiling a chronology in the context of the assessment of the child using professional judgment.
- identifying the key events to be recorded.
- making sure that what is recorded is accurate and in date order.
- recording facts, significant events in the person's life.
- taking account of the perspective of the child at the centre – that is, understanding the significance of events for them.

There are questions surrounding what to include in a chronology and this is explored in detail later, but as a starter, core elements are set out here.

Core elements of a chronology

- key dates such as dates of birth, life events, and moves
- facts, such as a child's name placed on the child protection register, multi-agency public protection arrangements (JMAPP) meeting
- transitions, life changes
- key professional interventions such as reviews, court disposals
- a very brief note of an event – for example, a fall down stairs, coming to school with a bruise. At the same time, the writer needs to provide enough information for the entry to make sense. Statements like: '... (the individual) behaved inappropriately...' do not have sufficient detail
- the actions that were taken or, if no action was taken, to explain why
- not opinions – these may be for the case record, but the strength of chronologies lies in their reporting of facts, times, dates and so on

- chronologies have a wider application than risk assessment and management. A chronology can be a valuable tool for planning and supervision. When staff are very busy juggling many different demands, progress in working with a person may drift. Several months can pass without any action and such unacceptable delay is not always easy to identify from a record. A chronology of dates can help to flag up delay and drift

Single agencies and disciplines should consider and define what may be significant events from their agency or disciplines perspective and add these suggestions to this core group of events. Suggestions for this can be found in the *Jersey Children First* Guidance for all those Working with Children and Young People, with Tools, Templates and Supporting Documents, Section B: 18 The Child's Chronology of Significant Events. This is the value of single agency chronologies – analysis of events from a particular discipline and what this may mean for the child.

2. A chronology is not an assessment – but part of assessment

A chronology is not an assessment, it is informed by, and is part of, an assessment. Gathering together large amounts of information is not an assessment. Sharing it does not constitute a child protection plan. Practitioners must take the next step to state why they attach significance to some issues and not to others. Chronologies are a key part of assessing and managing risk.

3. A chronology is not an end in itself but a working tool which promotes engagement with people who use services

For example if a social worker simply gathers information and does not analyse it, the chronology would have had no purpose and children might have remained unprotected. Some practitioners told us that they felt compiling a chronology was an exercise that took up considerable time but did not lead anywhere – largely because the chronology had not been analysed.

Chronologies are a part of recording and should be available to the person they are about, unless there are justifiable reasons to withhold the information because sharing it would increase risks for the person. The chronology should normally be shown to, and discussed with, the person it is about, or their parent in the case of a young child.

Sharing chronologies and consulting people who use services is important in ensuring accuracy. Mistakes, particularly concerning dates of significant family events (such as dates of birth, dates when families moved home) where small but significant errors in a chronology can then be replicated over and over again in reports. Sharing chronologies can also help in working together and strengthening a sense of achievement and progress. Reviewing a chronology alongside a person who uses services can help to identify where they have succeeded, for example in reducing their drug dependency or improving the school attendance of their child.

A chronology is not simply a way of storing contact data. In discussing with practitioners there are differing views on where key information about a child should be located. Electronic file systems vary but all should have the equivalent of a file front sheet with essential information about contacts, practitioners, health staff, and so on. Storing this essential information, however, is not the purpose of the chronology.

4. A chronology must be based on up-to-date, accurate case recording

The importance of accurate recording has been a key theme in child protection inquiries since the mid-1970s. One of the first major child protection inquiries into the death of Maria Colwell noted that: 'Inaccuracies and deficiencies in the recording of visits and telephone messages played a part in the tragedy... the importance of recording actual dates and distinguishing between fact and impression'.

Other inquiries found that allegations by neighbours were sometimes not recorded fully, were ignored or deemed malicious. All eight child protection inquiries concluded between 1974 and 1981 reported that records were incomplete. Many years later, poor recording was noted in Lord Laming's inquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié (2004).

The chronology should record what was done at the time. Many chronologies list events, dates etc. but must record the action which was taken at the time and an explanation if there was no action.

5. A chronology should contain sufficient detail, but is not a substitute for recording in the file

Practitioners have told us that this is one of the most complex areas. Some commented that chronologies had become repeats of the case recording, they were arduous to compile and, once completed, were so detailed workers could not 'see the wood for the trees'. One reason for this surplus detail has been an attempt, in some areas, to introduce a system-based solution to compiling chronologies, that is, providing the facility to transfer automatically case-record entries into the corresponding chronology. The intention was to make it less time consuming to compile chronologies. However this can lead to an indiscriminate transfer of case-recording entries, resulting in chronologies that were too long and detailed. This needs to be resisted.

6. A chronology should be flexible – detail collected may be increased if risk increases

Chronologies are working tools, not an end in themselves. The needs of the assessment will influence the type of chronology. A chronology should set out a series of significant events. The amount of detail in a chronology should depend largely on how a significant event is defined. It is beyond the scope of this guide to provide a detailed account of what events might be considered significant, and in what circumstances. However, there are some pointers, which may help practitioners exercise professional judgement in arriving at such decisions. The following events may be classed as significant in most chronologies:

births; deaths; marriages; house moves; serious illness; changes in household composition; changes in legal status; arrests and court appearances; educational achievement; employment status; Domestic Abuse Notifications; child protection conferences or multi agency arrangements such as JMAPPAs.

As the needs of the individual become more complex, vulnerability increases and everyday events may helpfully be regarded as carrying more significance. Here are two examples:

- a child who rarely misses school and who is occasionally absent - this is unlikely to be regarded as significant. On the other hand, for a child whose name is on the child protection register for neglect, any absence is likely to be regarded as significant.
- where there is a high risk for a child living at home, the chronology may not just include school attendance, but also specific details. This could include whether the

child was dressed appropriately, whether the child was collected from school on time, and by whom.

7. The importance of review and analysis – a chronology that is not reviewed regularly is of limited relevance

In order to carry out an effective assessment it is essential to review and analyse the chronology. A chronology which is not reviewed and analysed serves little, if any, purpose. There is a range of opportunities to review a chronology. Such as the role of supervision in reviewing a chronology. Some practitioners told us about peer reviews, where staff reviewed chronologies each had written and considered patterns, timescales and risks which could be identified. This will help staff to accurately identify patterns of significant events, or help parents, relatives or carers to understand the impact of these events on the individual's wellbeing.

8. Single-agency and multi-agency chronologies have different demands and expectations

A single-agency chronology provides a brief description and summarised account of events in date order. It should be used as an analytical tool to assist in the understanding of the impact of life events and to inform decision making. They are of particular value when they include events that are considered significant from a particular discipline or service perspective. Agencies are encouraged to consider from their own perspective events that should be usefully included. An indication of these is included in the *Jersey Children First* Guidance for all those Working with Children and Young People, with Tools, Templates and Supporting Documents, Section B: 18 The Child's Chronology of Significant Events. Integration of single-agency chronologies can establish a wider context from the agencies involved with a child or young person.

An integrated chronology can be produced as part of a specific multi agency plan and will include only information extracted from single agency chronologies that is relevant and proportionate to support the plan. An integrated chronology should therefore be started when there is concern about a person's wellbeing, to support a multi-agency response.

Complications can arise between practitioners if it is not clear exactly who has responsibility for gathering together single agency chronologies, combining them into one chronology and updating it regularly. Multi-agency chronologies must also be regularly reviewed, analysed and updated by the lead worker through the Team around the Child process. Team around the Child members are expected to contribute to it and information sharing outside of meetings should continue, as is needed in the best interests of the child.

'The Lead Worker is responsible for collating the integrated chronology, and all agencies contributing to the integrated assessment are expected to contribute to it. This process will work best when there is a shared sense of responsibility by all for gathering, recording and passing the information to the Lead Worker'.

Conclusion

We want practitioners to use the new approaches to recording and assessment in work with children as opportunities to develop the use of chronologies. However, there are also risks that a mechanical approach which automatically records predetermined 'key facts' could weaken the focus and role of professional judgment, which are vital to effective practice. A chronology must never become an end in itself.

Chronologies, as part of a skilled and focused approach, can be an essential tool in supporting and protecting children by:

- bringing together issues identified by different agencies and presenting them coherently
- contributing precise information which can help practitioners to identify patterns which will contribute to an assessment and strengthening the partnership between practitioners and people who use services.

Appendix 1 Chronology Template

Name(s) of child(ren) in the family

Define entries clearly that are professional opinion or hearsay otherwise they will be taken as fact. **Complete all boxes on the row.**

Source – type in one of Health, Education/Early Years Settings, Social Work, Police, Family, Jersey Youth Service, Housing or Other etc. (and state agency)

Completed by <i>Name and role of the person completing the entry</i>	Date of Event <i>Not the date you make the entry unless they are the same</i>	Significant Event <i>Name, role and relationship of all present. Use the name and relationship i.e. 'Jane Smith, step-mother,' or 'Jay Smith, brother'. Include positive events, such as when things were going well</i>	Action(s) <i>Explain action (s) taken as a result of the significant event</i> <i>Give rationale if no action taken/required</i>	Outcome(s) <i>Likely to be positive events such as when support has helped.</i> <i>Complete when actions have been undertaken</i>	Source <i>Provide the agency providing the significant event. This is not where the information is recorded.</i>

Press the tab button in the far right hand column to create additional entries if the table is full:



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