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Hybrid child protection conferences in England: a scoping and practice development project

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16/09/2025

Recruitment status
Recruiting

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30/09/2025

Overall study status
Ongoing

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16/09/2025

Condition category
Other

[ ] Prospectively registered
[ ] Protocol
[ ] Statistical analysis plan
[ ] Results
[ ] Individual participant data
[ ] Record updated in last year

Plain English summary of protocol

Background and study aims

This research investigates a recent major change to the child protection system in England – the introduction of hybrid child protection conferences (CPCs). A CPC is held when there are worries that a child has been harmed or is in danger. Both parents and professionals (e.g. teachers, doctors, police, social workers) attend. A conference chairperson leads the meeting, making sure everyone can share their views. Before Covid-19, CPCs were usually in-person. Now, many places hold 'hybrid' CPCs where parents, chair and social worker meet in-person and everyone else joins virtually. Other places may have different hybrid arrangements. A CPC is a significant event where professionals make important decisions about compulsory state intervention in family life. Many parents find even sensitively managed CPCs threatening because they fear their children may be removed and because they focus on whether parents have harmed their children. It is vital that conferences are fair, inclusive and the right decisions are made. Because of this, this study partners with the Parents, Families and Allies Network (PFAN) and the Kinship Charity to involve parents with lived experience to help design and carry out this research.

Last year in England, there were 74,000 initial CPCs and 50,780 children on child protection plans. It is therefore vital to understand the impact (and unexpected effects) of the change to hybrid CPCs. Hybrid CPCs seem to make things more convenient for professionals. However, there are worries that they might make it harder for some parents to take part. There are also concerns they may affect decisions made about children. The study wants to find out what works well and what doesn't for hybrid CPCs, suggesting changes if needed.

This research aims to study how hybrid CPCs work and the impact for parents, professionals and outcomes for children, including how local authorities use hybrid CPCs, how hybrid CPCs shape decisions made about children, how parents and professionals experience hybrid CPCs, and any effects hybrid CPCs have on parents from minoritised communities. The research has three stages: In the first stage, it will look at how hybrid CPCs are currently operating across England. In the second stage, it will focus on six different local authority areas and closely study live CPCs. The researchers will talk to parents and professionals to understand their experiences and suggestions for improvement. In the third stage, they will work together to create practice guidance. This will have advice for parents, social workers and conference chairs on the best ways to approach CPCs to involve parents and to protect children. It will be shared nationally by

Research in Practice, an organisation that promotes evidence-informed practice in children's social care.

Who can participate?
Professionals running or taking part in CPCs and parents/carers who have experience of relevant CPCs.

What does the study involve?
Anyone taking part must be able to give informed consent and will be taken through an ethically approved project information sheet to find out what's involved and help them decide whether they wish to take part. Professionals taking part in the research will be invitated to one of nine online, regional workshops running in Stage 1. For professionals connected to the six local authority sites in Stage 2, they might be taking part in a live CPC that is observed by the research team and interviewed or invited to join a focus group with other professionals to discuss their experiences and views of hybrid CPCs.

Parents/carers taking part in the research may be involved in one of three online workshops running in Stage 1, to discuss their previous experiences and views of hybrid CPCs. For parents /carers connected to the six local authority sites in Stage 2, they might be taking part in a live CPC that the research team wish to observe, and then be interviewed to discuss their experience and views of hybrid CPCs.

What are the possible benefits and risks of participating?
Taking part in this research is a chance to build an understanding of the use and issues concerned with hybrid CPCs. This will help to develop co-produced guidance that can be shared to help decisions around how CPCs should be set up and supported - to make CPCs better. There are no direct risks involved with taking part, although there are obviously sensitivities, given the subject matter.

Where is the study run from?
The University of East Anglia, UK, and King's College London, UK

When is the study starting and how long is it expected to run for?
January 2024 to December 2027

Who is funding the study?
The National Institute for Health and Care Research (NIHR), Research Programme for Social Care (RPSC), UK

Who is the main contact?
Dr Laura Cook, Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of East Anglia, and Dr Julia Rimmer (Research Fellow), CPConference.Research@uea.ac.uk.

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Study information

Scientific Title
The implementation of hybrid child protection conferences in England: a scoping and practice development project

Acronym
HCPCs

Study objectives
This research will investigate hybrid child protection conferences (CPCs) in England. It aims to provide the first overview of the implementation of hybrid CPCs in England, identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for vulnerable children and their parents across a range of user groups. The overarching objective is to evaluate critically the use of the hybrid approach and guide how to maximise parental participation.

CPCs are an important stage of the child protection process in England. A CPC is held where there are concerns that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm. CPCs are attended by parents and the professionals working with them. CPCs are significant events, determining the level and nature of children's social care intervention. Last year in England, there were 74,000 initial CPCs. Following the pandemic, there was a major shift from in-person to 'hybrid' CPCs, where there is a combination of in-person and online attendance. This has important implications for: parental participation, fairness, efficiency and decision-making to protect at-risk children. However, there is no existing research on the implementation of hybrid CPCs or the equality, diversion and inclusion implications of this change.

Ethics approval required
Ethics approval required

Ethics approval(s)
Approved 05/06/2025, University on East Anglia, School of Social Work Research Ethics Subcommittee (Norwich Research Park, Norwich, NR4 7TJ, United Kingdom; +44 (0)1603 593 297; ethicsmonitor@uea.ac.uk), ref: ETH2425-1914

Primary study design
Observational

Study design
Observational qualitative study in three stages

Study type(s)
Other

Health condition(s) or problem(s) studied

This research will investigate the implementation of hybrid child protection conferences (CPCs) in England.

Interventions

National hybrid CPC implementation across England will be scoped in Stage one through a series of consultation workshops with a) safeguarding professionals (n=160) across local authorities and safeguarding partnerships b) consultation workshops with parents (n=30) with lived experience of hybrid CPCs and c) a desktop analysis of policy documents from local authorities (n=152) on the current arrangements for CPCs. This will provide the first picture of hybrid CPC implementation across England, generate a list of themes around strengths/weaknesses /impacts of hybrid CPC practice in terms of i) specific user groups and ii) safeguarding concern types for in-depth investigation in stage two and inform the selection of six case study sites for stage two.

Stage two (12 months) will provide a detailed, qualitative picture of the processes of hybrid CPCs. This will include a SWOT analysis (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) of hybrid CPCs with a focus on parental participation, professional participation and the decisionmaking process. This will include the impact of hybrid CPCs on specific user groups and in relation to specific types of safeguarding concern. It will involve in-depth case studies of CPC practice in six local authorities using ethnographic methods. This will consist of observations of CPCs (n=60), interviews with parents (n=30) and interviews/focus groups with professionals (n=60).

Stage two data will be analysed using iterative individual and cross-case analysis. Within each case study site, we will conduct a descriptive case study analysis identifying themes within data type (observations, interviews, focus groups) and then an overview of hybrid CPC practice in the LA as a whole (including areas of agreement and divergence, e.g. between parents and professionals). We shall then conduct a cross-case analysis of each of the six sites, drawing out commonalities and divergence between local authorities. Finally, we will produce an overarching SWOT analysis of hybrid CPCs drawing on data from the six sites (stage two) and consultation (stage one) identifying strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of hybrid CPCs across each of the stakeholder groups (e.g. parents, Chairs, social workers etc), by concern type (e.g. neglect, sexual abuse, domestic abuse) and by user group (e.g. parents from minoritised groups).

Stage three (6 months) will generate co-produced guidance on effective hybrid CPC delivery. Drawing upon the findings and working with our PPI group we will develop open access resources to support hybrid CPCs which will be distributed across England.
The research will be underpinned by the involvement of parents with lived experience of child protection processes working alongside the team as co-researchers.

Intervention Type

Not Specified

Primary outcome(s)

1. Hybrid CPC implementation will be scoped using data collected through consultation workshops with a) safeguarding professionals across local authorities and safeguarding partnerships, b) consultation workshops with parents with lived experience of hybrid CPCs, and c) a desktop analysis of policy documents from local authorities during stage one (12 months)
2. Parental participation, professional participation, and decision-making process measured using (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) SWOT analysis and ethnographic

methods (observations, interviews, focus groups) during stage two (12 months)
3. Themes in hybrid CPC practice measured using descriptive case study analysis, identifying themes within data type (observations, interviews, focus groups) and cross-case analysis of each of the six sites, drawing out commonalities and divergences between local authorities during stage two
4. SWOTs of hybrid CPCs by stakeholder group, concern type, and user group measured using overarching SWOT analysis at the end of stage two.
5. Co-produced guidance on hybrid CPC delivery developed collaboratively with the PPI group during stage three (6 months)

Key secondary outcome(s)
There are no secondary outcome measures

Completion date
30/12/2027

Eligibility

Key inclusion criteria
Group 1: These are safeguarding professionals (primarily from social care, but also health and the police, and furthermore from education etc.)
1. Safeguarding professionals in stage 1 (national scoping 152 LAs) (Principal Social Workers, child and family social workers and CPC chairs) from children's social care departments in local authorities across England. All will need to give informed consent to take part.
2. Safeguarding professionals in stage 2 (6 LA case study sites). The study aims to interview the Conference Chair and at least one other professional from each of the 10 x 6 CPCs observed. Secondly, the study will seek to capture professionals' more general views on hybrid CPCs. Within each case study site, the study will identify a sample of professionals who regularly attend hybrid CPCs (to include conference chairs, children's social workers professionals from education and health) and invite them to attend a focus group to share their views on hybrid CPCs including: advantages and limitations, local learning and implementation and suggestions for development. All will need to give informed consent to take part.

Group 2: Adult parents or carers of child(ren) whose safeguarding is the subject of the Child Protection Conference (CPC): where there are concerns that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm.
1. In stage 1, parents/carers will need to have had recent experience of hybrid CPCs, and give informed consent to take part in an online workshop.
2. In stage 2, parents/carers who have taken part in observed CPCs will need to give informed consent to take part in an interview.

Participant type(s)
Health professional, Service user

Healthy volunteers allowed
No

Age group
Mixed

Sex

All

Key exclusion criteria
Not meeting the key participant inclusion criteria

Date of first enrolment
01/09/2025

Date of final enrolment
01/06/2027

Locations

Countries of recruitment
United Kingdom

England

Study participating centre
Local authories
All English LAs for stage 1, six English LAs for stage 2 (to be sampled)
United Kingdom
-

Sponsor information

Organisation
University of East Anglia

ROR
https://ror.org/026k5mg93

Funder(s)

Funder type
Government

Funder Name
National Institute for Health and Care Research

Alternative Name(s)

National Institute for Health Research, NIHR Research, NIHRresearch, NIHR - National Institute for Health Research, NIHR (The National Institute for Health and Care Research), NIHR

Funding Body Type
Government organisation

Funding Body Subtype
National government

Location
United Kingdom

Results and Publications

Individual participant data (IPD) sharing plan
The data sharing plans for the current study are to be decided and made available at a later date, but given the ethical sensitivities are unlikely to be publicly available.

IPD sharing plan summary
Data sharing statement to be made available at a later date