Report on Use of Safe Uncertainty in Threshold Decision-Making

Children's Social Care Peer Review CiN / CP Threshold

SESLIP Pan-Regional Workshop 12-1-26

Executive Summary

Below is a thematic summary report drawn from a peer review tool completed at the **Use of Safe Uncertainty Workshop** on 12 January 2026, focusing specifically on how safe uncertainty methodology was applied across 25 reviewed Children's Social Care cases. The analysis identifies strengths, areas for development, opportunities to further embed and use the concept of Safe Uncertainty, and any threats, or barriers, in doing this.

The synthesis is based on the completed peer-review tool responses and the workshop framework for managing the threshold between Child in Need (CiN) and Child Protection (CP).

Scope and Method

A reference group made up of key contacts was established from each of the 5 local authorities, to ensure that the case documentation requested for the review and the questions to review them against were appropriate and would give sufficient depth without being overwhelming.

Five review groups were established, each comprising 5 or 6 members, drawn from each local authority and including a range of roles across operational managers, strategic managers and QA. This provided the opportunity for rich and diverse discussion across local authority boundaries

Each local authority provided 5 cases, made up of a combination of CiN and CP, one of these (5 cases in total) was reviewed in advance on an individual basis and the other 20 were reviewed live during the workshop, 4 per group, with responses gathered via a pre-prepared review tool.

This summary report draws on peer review discussions of cases that sat close to the Child Protection threshold. Cases are referenced **by case number and practitioner initials only**, in line with your instruction. The analysis considers:

- Evidence of safe uncertainty
- Quality of risk analysis
- Decision-making between CiN and CP
- Child and family voice
- Reflective and systemic practice

1. Introduction and Purpose

The focus of the review was to examine how effectively **safe uncertainty methodology** was used to inform proportionate decision-making, particularly where cases could potentially be managed under **Child in Need (CiN)** arrangements.

The review forms part of a wider workforce development approach aligned with Children's Social Care reform, including the strengthening of **Family Help**, **family networks**, and relational practice.

2. Evidence of Strengths in Practice

2.1 Use of Safe Uncertainty to Support Proportionate Decisions

Across several cases, practitioners demonstrated the ability to:

- Hold uncertainty without defaulting to CP processes
- Differentiate between **professional anxiety** and **evidence of significant harm**
- Consider whether risk was *manageable* rather than simply *present*

Case 1 (LF / JB – Pre-work case)
This case showed strong application of safe uncertainty, with clear articulation of:

- Why risk could no longer be safely held at CiN level
- How current harm differed from historical concerns
- The purpose of escalation to CP, rather than escalation by default

Case 3 (JB)
Reviewers noted thoughtful analysis of fluctuating risk, avoiding binary "safe / unsafe" conclusions. Multiple hypotheses were held, and the decision-making narrative reflected reflective rather than defensive practice.

2.2 Analytical Clarity Around Risk and Harm

Where practice was strongest, there was a clear distinction between:

- Cumulative concern
- Current or likely significant harm
- Risk that could be managed through strengthened CiN planning

Case 2 (Individual response)
Demonstrated strong analytical reasoning by questioning whether discomfort sat with the professional system rather than within the child's lived experience.

2.3 Attention to the Child and Family Voice

In cases evidencing safe uncertainty, the child's day-to-day experience and the family's response to intervention were actively considered.

This strengthened:

- Proportionality
- Ethical decision-making
- Confidence in holding cases at CiN where appropriate

3. Areas for Development

3.1 Drift Toward Process-Led Decision-Making

Across multiple cases (including **Cases 2 and 4**), reviewers identified decisions that appeared influenced by:

- Length of time open to services
- Previous CP history
- Organisational or partner pressure

Less frequently, but significantly, reviewers noted decision making being impacted by:

- Changes of social worker and/or manager
- Diversity of the family – cultural/racial identity/gender

In these cases, escalation decisions were not always underpinned by clear evidence of **current or likely significant harm**.

Development need:
Greater discipline in revisiting the *threshold question* at each decision point, including at the point of case closure.

3.2 Limited Explicit Use of Safe Uncertainty Language

While elements of safe uncertainty were evident, they were not always explicitly named or recorded.

This limits:

- Shared understanding across the system
- Confidence in defensible decision-making
- Transferability of learning

Development need:
More consistent use of reflective, tentative language in assessments and supervision
Clear recording of "what we don't yet know" and how this is being tested

4. Opportunities to Embed Safe Uncertainty Further

4.1 Supervision and Leadership Practice

The strongest opportunity lies in embedding safe uncertainty into:

- Supervision frameworks
- Management oversight
    - Encouraging managers to model tolerance of uncertainty rather than seeking premature certainty
- Decision-making panels (including child protection conferences)

Key reflective questions include:

- *What risk are we holding and why?*
- *What has changed?*
- *Is this about unmanageable harm or system anxiety?*

4.2 Workforce Development and Shared Language

The peer review model provides a strong foundation for:

- Embedding safe uncertainty in audit tools
- Aligning CiN and CP frameworks
- Supporting consistent threshold application across teams and partners

4.3 Alignment with Family Help and Network Approaches

Safe uncertainty supports:

- Earlier, relational intervention
- Use of family and community networks to manage risk
- Viewing CiN as an active safeguarding response, not a lesser one

5. Threats and Risks to Embedding Safe Uncertainty

5.1 Organisational Risk Aversion

A consistent threat identified across reviews was the pull toward **unsafe certainty**.

Key threats include:

- Fear of blame or inspection outcomes
- Cultures that equate CP processes with safety
- Limited time for reflective analysis due to workload pressures
- Timescales dictating when decisions should be made eg between Strategy Discussions/S47/Child Protection Conferences

5.2 External Professional Pressure

Several cases referenced pressure from partner agencies, risking escalation driven by reassurance-seeking rather than evidence.

5.3 Misinterpretation of Safe Uncertainty

Without clarity, safe uncertainty risks being misunderstood as:

- Avoidance of decision-making
- Lowering safeguarding standards

This reinforces the need for strong leadership messaging and ensuring understanding of the model throughout the workforce.

6. Conclusion

The peer review demonstrates that safe uncertainty is already present in pockets of strong practice. Where used well, it supports:

- Ethical, proportionate safeguarding
- Better alignment with Family Help principles
- More confident holding of risk at CiN level when appropriate

Embedding this approach consistently will require:

- Leadership modelling
- Structured supervision
- Shared understanding across the system

Used well, safe uncertainty strengthens **proportionate, ethical, and relationship-based decision-making** at the CiN/CP threshold rather than weakening safeguarding responses.

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