

# Fife Child Protection Committee 7 Minute Briefing

## When Services Find It Hard to Engage – Disguised Compliance and Professional Curiosity

### Core Elements of Child Wellbeing, Welfare and Protection



#### 1 Key Concepts

##### Disguised compliance

Parents or carers may appear cooperative with services (e.g. attending meetings, agreeing to plans) without making meaningful changes that improve a child's safety or wellbeing.

##### Professional curiosity

Maintaining an open, questioning mindset about a child's lived experience. This includes respectful uncertainty, healthy scepticism, and testing assumptions over time rather than accepting appearances at face value.

#### 2 Why this Matters

Disguised compliance and difficulties with engagement feature repeatedly in **local and national learning reviews**, across all age groups.

- These patterns can **mask harm**, create false reassurance, delay decision-making, and contribute to drift.
- **Non-engagement** and **disguised compliance** often occur together and require **heightened professional curiosity** and shared multi-agency vigilance.

#### 3 Common Patterns to Be Alert to

Be alert to **patterns over time**, rather than one-off incidents, including:

- Repeated missed or cancelled appointments
- Restricted or controlled access to the child or home
- Aggression, intimidation, or hostility towards professionals
- Superficial cooperation without follow-through
- Attempts to manipulate, split, or divert professionals
- Frequent changes of address or contact details
- Selective, delayed, or inconsistent information sharing

These behaviours may be **masking underlying risks**, such as domestic abuse, substance use, mental health concerns, trauma, learning disability, or fear of statutory intervention.

#### 4 Keep the Child at the Centre

- Stay **child-focused at all times**.
- Ensure the child is **seen, heard, and spoken to**, and that their voice and lived experience are clearly recorded.
- **Inability to see or speak to a child should be treated as a potential risk indicator**, not an administrative issue. Ask: *Why?*

#### 5 Professional Impact and Safety

Working with hostile, avoidant, or non-engaging families can affect:

- Professional confidence and decision-making
- Emotional wellbeing
- Willingness to challenge or escalate concerns

These reactions are understandable. **They must not lead to reduced scrutiny or delayed action.** Agencies have a responsibility to ensure:

- Access to reflective supervision
- Lone-working and staff safety arrangements
- Wellbeing and debriefing support
- A culture of shared learning and accountability

#### 6 If Concerns Persist - Act

Ongoing concerns **must not result in drift** (Non-engagement can indicate **increased risk**, not reduced concern)

- Discuss concerns promptly in **supervision or line management**.
- Ensure concerns are **clearly recorded** and shared appropriately across agencies.
- Consider whether the threshold has been met for:
  - [Interagency Referral Discussion \(IRD\)](#)
  - [Referral to the Children's Reporter](#)
  - Use of **legal measures** where a child may be at risk of significant harm

#### 7 Local Guidance and Learning

##### Local guidance

This briefing summarises key messages from the [Fife Multi-Agency Child Protection Guidance: When Services Find it Hard to Engage](#).

Practitioners and managers should refer to the full guidance for fuller information on all aspects.

##### Learning and development

Further multi-agency learning on disguised compliance and professional curiosity is available through the CPC training programme:

- **Core Elements of Wellbeing, Welfare and Protection – When Services Find it Hard to Engage**

Details of upcoming dates and how to book are available in the [CPC multi-agency training schedule](#).