

Hybrid child protection conferences in England: Participation, relational practice, and decision-making

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Abstract

Child protection conferences are central to decision-making within child welfare systems. Following the expansion of online working during the pandemic, many English local authorities have adopted hybrid conferences, combining in-person and online participation. However, little is known about how these arrangements shape participation and decision-making. This article reports first-stage findings from a national study of hybrid conferences. It examines how they are organized and practitioners' views on their implications for participation and multi-agency deliberation. Data derive from nine regional workshops with children's social care professionals ($n=301$) and an associated questionnaire ($n=375$), with responses received from 95 percent of English local authorities. The analysis identifies a six-type typology of conference configurations currently in use, spanning a continuum from fully in-person to fully online formats. In addition to mapping national practice, this article makes a conceptual contribution to understanding professional judgement in child protection by showing how different conference configurations create distinct relational conditions that shape interaction and decision-making. While hybrid

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conferences may widen access and improve attendance, some, particularly those where parents attend online, introduce relational risks that may influence decision-making dynamics. Hybrid conferences should therefore be treated as adaptable tools requiring explicit consideration of their relational and decision-making effects.

Keywords: child protection; child protection conferences; hybrid conferences; hybrid practice; decision-making; participation.

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Introduction

This article reports findings from the first stage of a national study examining the implementation of hybrid child protection conferences across England. It forms part of a wider research project exploring the implications of hybrid conferencing for parental participation, professional collaboration and decision-making. The subsequent stages of the study will involve ethnographic research across six case study sites and the co-production of practice and policy messages based on the findings. Drawing on the project's scoping phase, the present article provides a national overview of how English local authorities have adopted hybrid conferences which combine in-person and online participation, and considers the implications for participation, decision-making and multi-agency collaboration.

Child protection conferences

Child protection conferences are a central component of England's statutory child protection system. Conferences form part of the processes through which local authorities discharge their duties under Sections 17 and 47 of the Children Act 1989 to safeguard and promote children's welfare and to investigate concerns about significant harm. The purpose, membership and operation of conferences are set out in *Working Together to Safeguard Children* (Department for Education (DfE) 2026a) which identifies them as the principal multi-agency forum for sharing information, assessing risk and determining whether a child requires a child protection plan. Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs) are convened where there are concerns that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm. They are currently chaired by an independent child protection conference chair, a senior practitioner employed by the local authority not directly involved in case management. Conferences bring together professionals working with the family, the child's parents or carers, and sometimes the child themselves. During the ICPC, professionals consider information available to establish whether the child should become the subject of a child

protection plan, identify the support or intervention required to safeguard the child and clarify the role of each professional. The first review child protection conference (RCPC) is held three months after the ICPC. Its purpose is to assess whether the child is continuing or is likely to continue suffering significant harm and the progress made against the child protection plan. Conferences are pivotal events in families' lives, shaping decisions about the level and nature of children's social care intervention and establishing the multi-agency core group responsible for coordinating support and safeguarding interventions for the child and family.

The participation of parents is recognized as an important element of conferencing and is emphasized in statutory guidance ([Department for Education \(DfE\) 2026a](#)). Conferences provide a forum in which parents can hear and respond to professional concerns, contribute their perspectives on their child's circumstances and participate in decisions about safeguarding and support. However, research highlights the complexities involved in achieving meaningful parental participation. While studies suggest that parental involvement in conferences may be associated with better outcomes for children, parents may also experience conferences as intimidating and difficult spaces in which to contribute ([Thoburn et al. 1995](#)). Research suggests some parents feel insufficiently prepared, uncertain about the process or unsure how their views are considered during conferences ([Smithson and Gibson 2017](#); [Muench et al. 2017](#); [Gibson 2020](#)). Other studies highlight how the formal structure and the presence of multiple professionals can make it challenging for parents to participate meaningfully ([Hall and Slembrouck 2001](#); [Jackson et al. 2020](#)). These challenges may be particularly pronounced for parents from minoritized communities ([Cox 2011](#); [Okpokiri 2021](#)) including fathers, who have historically been marginalized within child welfare processes ([Goff 2012](#); [Philip et al. 2019](#)). Within England, this has led to a growing interest in the role of parental advocates in supporting parents before, during and after conferences ([Fitz-Symonds et al. 2024](#)).

Similarly, research has highlighted that children often experience child protection meetings as difficult environments and may feel that their views are not fully heard ([Cossar et al. 2011](#)). Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) is a strengths-based approach that brings together children, families and their wider support networks to develop and agree plans to safeguard and promote children's welfare (see [McGinn et al. 2020](#)). FGDM has become increasingly embedded within English children's social care policy, particularly through *Working Together to Safeguard Children* ([Department for Education \(DfE\) 2026a](#)), the *Children's Social Care National Framework* ([Department for Education \(DfE\) 2026b](#)), and more recently proposals within the *Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill* ([Department for Education 2026c](#)). It is also evident in the early evaluation of the Families First for Children Pathfinder Programme ([Verian and National Children's Bureau 2025](#)). While these developments are intended to promote greater family involvement in

decision-making, it remains unclear how such approaches will interact with established child protection conference processes in practice.

The shift to hybrid conferencing

Following the pandemic, hybrid practice has emerged as a prominent feature of child and family social work (Daley 2023; Jeyasingham and Devlin 2024). Hybrid practice refers to the integration of online and in-person forms of practice, with practitioners moving fluidly between these spaces as part of their everyday work (Pink *et al.* 2022). Drawing insights from organizational studies, the concept of sociomateriality (Orlikowski 2007) has been used to conceptualize the introduction of hybrid practice in social work (Jeyasingham and Devlin 2024). Sociomaterial perspectives suggest that virtual technologies are not neutral tools but actively shape communication and participation within professional settings. Hybridity—and the movement between virtual and physical spaces—therefore influences how social work takes place, how practitioners engage with children, families and colleagues, and how they make sense of and experience their work with implications for professional relationships, communication and decision-making (Pink *et al.* 2022; Daley 2023; Jeyasingham and Devlin 2024). Child protection conferences represent one manifestation of this broader shift towards hybrid practice.

The present study builds on prior research conducted by the author (Baginsky *et al.* 2020), which demonstrated that during the pandemic, child protection conferences shifted rapidly from in-person meetings, typically held in local authority venues, to being conducted almost entirely online. This transition had important implications for both parental and professional participation. On the one hand, online conferences were associated with increased multi-agency attendance, particularly among health and police professionals, and enabled participation by some parents for whom barriers relating to travel, childcare or mobility had previously limited involvement. On the other hand, online conferencing also presented significant challenges, including concerns about confidentiality and the potential for digital exclusion among families (Baginsky *et al.* 2020).

Subsequent follow-up consultation with eleven local authorities undertaken by the authors in 2022 highlighted that, reflecting broader shifts towards hybrid forms of social work practice (Jeyasingham and Devlin 2024), child protection conferences had undergone a further transformation. Rather than returning to predominantly in-person arrangements, local authorities reported moving towards hybrid models, where some participants attended in person while others joined online. However, little was known about the implications and extent of this change.

In England alone, there were 72,250 ICPCs and 49,900 children were the subject of child protection plans in the most recent reporting year

([Department for Education 2025](#)). Given the scale and significance of these processes, understanding how hybrid conferencing is implemented and how it shapes parental participation and decision-making is important. While statutory guidance ([Department for Education \(DfE\) 2026a](#)) outlines the procedures for conferences, it reflects models of in-person practice and provides limited consideration of the challenges and opportunities associated with hybrid formats.

Methodology

This article draws on nine regional workshops with children's social care professionals and an associated registration questionnaire. Other scoping in this stage included discussions with professionals from agencies outside of children's social care and crucially, consultations with parents with lived experience of child protection processes (ongoing). The findings from these activities will be reported elsewhere and, along with findings reported here, will inform the next stage of the research.

The workshops with professionals addressed two research questions:

1. How are local authorities (LAs) in England implementing hybrid conferences, and to what extent is there variation in practice?
2. How, if at all, do practitioners perceive hybrid arrangements as affecting professional decision-making, collaboration, and participation?

Recruitment and sample

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of East Anglia Research Ethics Committee. The study received approval from the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS).

The research team worked with Research in Practice, part of the National Children's Bureau (NCB) to recruit children's social care professionals involved in conferences to participate in nine regional workshops. A dedicated webpage provided information about the workshops and access to the participant information sheet. As part of the registration process, participants completed a questionnaire recording their professional role, local authority, and the types of conference formats used within their organization (hybrid, fully in-person, or fully online). Following the workshops, the research team contacted local authorities from which no questionnaire responses had been received to maximize national coverage. The questionnaire was intended as a scoping exercise to map current conferencing arrangements and to inform discussion during the regional workshops. Participation occurred at the level of individual professionals, and multiple responses were received from some authorities. Although there are 153 local authorities in England, some children's social care services operate

Table 1. Workshop attendance by region.

Region	Total registrations	No. attended
London	76	65
East of England	31	23
South East	52	44
North East	18	17
South West	35	25
West Midlands	37	31
North West	64	48
Yorkshire and the Humber	35	26
East Midlands	27	22
Total	375	301

through children’s trusts and several neighbouring authorities function as paired arrangements with shared governance and processes, reducing the effective number of authorities to 150. In total, responses were received from 375 children’s social care professionals, with responses from at least one professional in 95 percent of English local authorities or children’s trusts. See [Table 1](#) for workshop attendance by region. Questionnaire responses were analysed descriptively to identify the range of conference formats currently used across local authorities and to provide an overview of national practice.

Nine online regional workshops were held with children’s social care professionals in October 2025, attended by 301 professionals. Participants included conference chairs, social workers, principal social workers and other children’s social care professionals involved in attending or coordinating conferences. Each workshop lasted ninety minutes and included a combination of small group and plenary sessions, incorporating discussion and interactive visual mapping activities (including virtual post-it notes) to support collective reflection. Group discussion methods are particularly useful when exploring organizational practices and developing areas of policy or practice, as participants can respond to, refine, and challenge each other’s accounts, generating insights that may not emerge in individual interviews ([Kitzinger 1995](#); [Morgan 1997](#)).

The workshops were chaired by members of the research team, supported by Research in Practice (NCB), all of whom have experience in child protection practice research. This familiarity supported engagement with participants and helped the research team interpret organizational and professional contexts described during discussions. At the same time, care was taken to approach the analysis reflexively, recognizing that practitioner workshops generate accounts shaped by professional perspectives, organizational norms, and local practice cultures. As with all group-based methods, these accounts are shaped by interactional dynamics within workshops, including the potential privileging of dominant professional narratives and the co-construction of shared understandings of practice.

Data analysis

Workshops were recorded and transcribed, and transcripts were checked for accuracy. The analysis was informed by three interrelated theoretical perspectives. Firstly, the concept of the ecology of judgement in child protection, which emphasizes that professional decision-making emerges through interaction within particular relational and organizational environments rather than through the application of formal procedures alone (Helm and Roesch-Marsh 2017). Secondly, relational approaches to social work highlight the importance of embodied interaction, emotional attunement and trust-building in work with families (Folgheraiter and Raineri 2017; Ferguson et al. 2020; Clark et al. 2026). Thirdly, sociomaterial perspectives suggest that technologies are not neutral tools but actively shape communication within professional settings (Orlikowski 2007; Leonardi and Treem 2012). These perspectives were used as sensitizing concepts for coding the data. Data were analysed thematically using an iterative approach informed by Braun and Clarke (2022) and Kiger and Varpio (2020) alongside Kluge's (2000) typology construction. The three main analytic phases are described below.

Phase one

Initial thematic coding (Kiger and Varpio 2020; Braun and Clarke 2022) focused on practitioners' descriptions of how conferences were organized within their local authorities and their views on the benefits and risks of hybrid conferences. Data from both breakout groups and plenary discussions were analysed using a coding framework that initially focused on the perceived drivers, risks, and benefits of hybrid approaches. The same coding framework was applied across the plenary and breakout sessions and to each workshop as a whole. Codes were then compared across the nine regional workshops to identify recurring patterns within the dataset.

During this process, the research team noted that there was variation in how practitioners defined hybrid. In this first phase of analysis, it emerged that practitioners were actually describing a range of configurations, rather than a single model of hybrid conferencing. The research team therefore shifted to paying particular analytic attention to professionals' specific descriptions of who attended the conference in-person, who attended online and in what combinations. This led to a shift in the analysis where we began to differentiate between types of hybrid conference, contributing to the development of a conference typology.

Phase two

Consistent with empirically-grounded approaches to typology construction (Kluge 2000), recurring configurations of online and in-person attendance

Table 2. Typology of child protection conference formats.

Type	Format	Pattern of participation
Type 1	Fully in-person	All participants attend physically in the same room
Type 2	Core in-room hybrid	Parents, chair, and social worker in person; other professionals online
Type 3	Parent-online hybrid	Professionals in person; parents attend online
Type 4	Professional variation hybrid	Parents and some professionals in person; other professionals online
Type 5	Split-family hybrid	Family members participate through different modes (e.g. one parent online, one in person)
Type 6	Fully online	All participants attend online

were organized into a typology of conference formats. First, conferences with similar arrangements of online and in-person attendance were identified and grouped. Iterative discussion and comparison within the research team then ensured that each type was internally coherent and sufficiently distinct (Kluge 2000), while also capturing meaningful variation across the workshop dataset as a whole. This process resulted in the identification of six conference types, which are described in Table 2.

Phase three

With the typology established, we revisited and extended the phase one thematic analysis to provide a more nuanced account of professionals’ perspectives on the advantages and risks associated with different conference types, drawing on participants’ descriptions of their effects. The theoretical perspectives outlined above—particularly relational approaches—sensitized us to the different relational conditions created within each conference type. This enabled a further layer of theorization across the typology reported below (see Table 3).

Findings

Registration questionnaire

The majority (88 percent) of respondents reported that their local authority used hybrid conferences, while 56 percent reported the continued use of fully in-person conferences and 33 percent reported the use of fully online conferences. Professionals often selected more than one approach, and where multiple responses were received from individuals in one local authority, there was considerable variation—suggesting different definitions and mixed practices with local authorities. The findings from the questionnaire are best understood as providing an overview of patterns in

Table 3. Relational conditions across child protection conference formats.

Full physical co-presence
All participants share the same physical space, supporting direct interaction, relational cues, and collective deliberation.
<i>Type 1</i> Fully in-person conferences
All participants share the same physical space, supporting direct interaction, relational cues, and collective deliberation.
Relationally anchored hybrid participation
A core group of participants (usually parents, chair, and social worker) is physically co-present, anchoring the relational dynamics of the meeting while others join virtually. <i>Type 2</i> Core in-room hybrid
Parents, chair, and social worker in person; other professionals online
<i>Type 4</i> Professional variation hybrid
Parents and some professionals in person; other professionals online
Relationally fragmented hybrid participation
Physical co-presence is reduced or absent, creating greater spatial separation between participants and potentially altering patterns of participation, communication, and emotional support.
<i>Type 3</i> Parent-online hybrid
Professionals in person; parents attend online
<i>Type 5</i> Split-family hybrid
Family members participate through different modes (e.g. one parent online, one in person)
<i>Type 6</i> Fully online
All participants attend online

practice, which were further explored through the qualitative workshop data presented below, where it became clear that the term ‘hybrid’ had several variants.

Workshop data

The following analysis traces the emergence of hybrid conferencing in England, introduces a six-type typology of conference configurations currently in use, and presents a conceptualization of the relational conditions each configuration creates. It then examines the risks these different configurations pose for relational practice and decision-making.

The emergence of hybrid conferencing

Hybrid conferences now constitute a significant component of the national child protection system in England. There was a clear sense of pre- and post-pandemic practice:

Back in the day ... you parked your car, you came to the conference, you got cover. (Principal Social Worker)

While across the nine regions, in-person conferences were widely regarded as optimal, hybrid conferences were often identified as a necessity. There were three key drivers of hybrid conferencing: capacity for

attendance related to post-Covid workload pressures, geography and infrastructure. Firstly, the option of online attendance was reported to support greater attendance from health, police, and education professionals, often removing the need for travel time, teaching or clinic cover, and was particularly valued for allowing out of region specialists or family members with specific insights who did not live locally, or even in the same country, to attend. Secondly, there were chairs in rural or geographically dispersed authorities who described hybrid conferencing as necessary to secure multi-agency attendance, essential to prevent rescheduling, as a mitigation against long travel times, and as a tool to manage dispersed police and health coverage. A third key driver was infrastructure in terms of buildings and investment in technology. In some local authorities, limited in-person meeting space, combined with health and safety restrictions on room capacity, necessitated hybrid conferencing. By contrast, others had access to dedicated suites with technology to support effective hybrid conferencing. Across England, there was a clear professional desire to bring attendees back into the room where possible and re-establish the relational core of safeguarding practice. However, the prevailing view was that hybrid conferencing is here to stay as a matter of necessity.

While practitioners frequently referred to ‘hybrid conferences’, this term encompassed a range of different attendance arrangements. Conferences varied in terms of who attended in person and who attended online, and how interaction between these groups was managed.

To capture this variation analytically, the findings are organized into a six-type typology of conferencing arrangements based on patterns of physical and online attendance among parents, professionals, and conference chairs. Rather than representing discrete categories, these arrangements form a continuum ranging from fully in-person to fully online meetings, with a range of hybrid configurations between these two endpoints. The six configurations identified through the analysis are summarized in [Table 2](#) and described below.

In *Type 1: Fully in-person conferences* all professionals and family members attend physically in the same room. Practitioners reported that this format had become less common following the pandemic, but many described a recent push to restore fully in-person conferences, particularly for ICPCs. One participant, for instance, described how email invites had been adjusted to emphasize that it should take place ‘face-to-face—we do not normally issue links to professionals’ (Child’s Social Worker) as a way to push back against the increasingly common expectation of on-line attendance.

In *Type 2 (core in-room hybrid)* conferences, parents attend in-person alongside the conference chair and the child’s social worker while other professionals and sometimes wider family members join online. As one participant described ‘we always ... get parents in the room with the IRO and the social worker. Mostly [other] professionals attend online’ (Child’s

Social Worker). This was one of the most commonly reported conference arrangements and was often described as a pragmatic compromise that maintained relational engagement with families while enabling wider professional attendance.

In *Type 3 (parent-online hybrid)* configurations, most professionals attend in-person in a shared room, while parents participate online. This approach was sometimes adopted to facilitate the attendance of family members with specific needs, such as health difficulties that made attending in person difficult (e.g. high levels of anxiety, post-partum recovery, or working patterns that made in-person attendance difficult). In some, but not all, instances, it was reported that a professional ‘goes out and sits with [the family] for support’ (Conference Chair) at the family home to provide relational and technical support.

In *Type 4 (professional variation hybrid)* conferences, parents and some professionals attend in person while others participate online, typically due to travel or workload pressures. A frequently reported arrangement was police or health colleagues attending online with all others in-person. This was described by some as the ‘only way that some professionals in the network could attend’ (Principal Social Worker).

Type 5 (split-family hybrid) conferences involve family members participating through different modes of attendance, for example one parent attending in-person while another joins online. Professionals described using this hybrid variant to ‘manage risk, particularly in violent relationships’ (Conference Chair) where there might be a risk to family members from each other, or towards professionals.

Finally, *Type 6 (fully online)* conferences involve all participants joining online. Although widely used during the pandemic, this format had become less common by the time of this study although it was reported by some as useful for review conferences. Others described it as a preferable alternative to type 3 conferences—some described converting to all-online if parents needed to attend online. As one practitioner described ‘the chairs find that if the family are on Teams, then it’s easier for everybody to be on Teams’ (Principal Social Worker).

While these configurations describe different patterns of attendance, practitioners’ accounts suggested that they may also create distinct relational conditions within conferences. The six types identified through the analysis can therefore be understood as reflecting three broader relational conditions. Fully in-person conferences represent situations of full physical co-presence, where all participants share the same physical environment. Several hybrid configurations retained what might be termed a ‘relational anchor’, in which a core group of participants, typically parents, the conference chair and the social worker, were physically co-present. This was regarded by practitioners as stabilizing the relational dynamics of the meeting, even when other professionals joined online. In contrast, other configurations, where parents or family members joined online, or where

interaction occurred entirely online, were reported to involve more fragmented patterns of participation that may give rise to relational fragmentation. The analysis presented here is necessarily tentative in relation to the impact of different conferencing configurations on relational dynamics. While the workshop data highlight practitioners' perceptions of how hybrid arrangements may shape interaction and participation, these interpretations require further examination in the observational case study phase of the study. Nevertheless, the analysis suggests that the six configurations can be understood as reflecting three broader relational conditions, illustrated in Table 3.

As the following presentation of participants' accounts illustrates, these different conference types and the relational conditions they created shaped interaction, participation and professional judgement in different ways.

Perceived risks to relational practice across hybrid conference configurations

Conferences were recognized by professionals as intensely emotionally-demanding events for families, where parents may hear difficult information about their child, respond to critical views of their parenting and engage in conversations that may have significant consequences for family life. Participants described these conversations as requiring careful pacing, empathy and sustained relational support from professionals. A concern raised across the workshops was the reduced opportunity for professionals to notice and respond to subtle relational cues when some participants attended online. In fully in-person conferences (Type 1), professionals described using non-verbal signals- such as eye contact, body language, and shifts in tone- to gauge parents' responses and adapt their communication accordingly. Participants suggested across hybrid conference types, where some attendees joined online, these cues were harder to perceive, particularly when cameras were off or video quality was poor. This could make it harder for practitioners to respond sensitively to parents' reactions during discussions about risk and safeguarding, reducing opportunities for relational attunement. As one conference chair explained:

I think the quality of explanation that professionals give in person is much more attuned to the parent. You can read the *body language*...
(Conference Chair)

Across hybrid configurations, practitioners described how communication mediated through digital technologies could disrupt the flow of discussion and interaction during conferences. Devices, microphones and screens often became prominent elements of the meeting environment, particularly when technical difficulties occurred. Participants described

situations where contributions had to be repeated due to poor audio quality, minute-takers struggled to hear discussion, or participants required reminders to mute or unmute microphones. In some venues with limited technological infrastructure, a single laptop was passed around the room, meaning participants could not see each other clearly. Loss of visual, sound or internet connection was reported to lead to a corresponding loss of relational connection.

Practitioners frequently distinguished between what they described as ‘good hybrid’ conferencing, supported by purpose-designed meeting rooms with large screens and fixed microphones and those that took place with improvised technological arrangements that made communication difficult. These differences were described as shaping how easily participants could contribute to discussion and engage with one another during conferences. Not only could these technologies disrupt communication, but they could help shape who was visible, who was heard and how interaction unfolded within conferences.

Perceived implications of hybrid conferencing for decision-making

Across hybrid configurations, practitioners reflected on potential implications for the conduct and outcomes of child protection conferences. Although the workshops were not designed to evaluate conferencing effectiveness directly, participants consistently described ways in which hybrid participation appeared to shape the dynamics of decision-making. While hybrid approaches increased professional attendance and could enhance information-sharing, participants noted that greater attendance did not necessarily translate into improved deliberation or quality of discussion. Chairs were concerned that hybrid conferences led to a shift towards rote information-sharing:

I find whoever comes online will just share their information and their report quite robotically... then they don't contribute to any further conversations.
(*Conference Chair*)

This suggests a shift from collaborative sense-making towards more sequential, and possibly performative, forms of information exchange in which contributions are delivered in turn rather than developed through interaction. Chairs also observed that professionals attending online tended to contribute only when directly called upon, with limited awareness of the broader narrative or evolving assessment in the room. In face-to-face conferences, chairs described managing discussion through subtle cues, inviting a professional to elaborate or respond without disrupting the flow of the meeting. However, when directed towards someone attending online, invitations to clarify or expand were more likely to be interpreted as a professional challenge and cue to defend their position.

At the conclusion of a conference, professionals are asked to make a recommendation about whether the child should be, or remain, on a child protection plan, confirm key actions and check families' understanding of the plan. This stage is critical and should reflect information-sharing and deliberation earlier in the conference. It was reported that professionals attending online were more likely to leave early. This was attributed to the relative ease of leaving an online meeting. While leaving abruptly would breach social norms in person, it could be done with a simple 'press of a button' for online attendees. Some Chairs described professionals leaving without notice or attending only part of the meeting. This was unhelpful for families' confidence in professionals' commitment to support them and for the integrity of the plan. There was also a risk that, towards the end of the meeting, professionals attending online disengaged and became inattentive with implications for decision-making:

... we go through a risk analysis form. I have to get agreement from everybody in the conference that this is still a risk. They won't comment, then I'll think 'do you still agree?' And it'll just be yes or a no ... It's really disjointed for that reason ... not very impactful ... because it isn't a discussion ... (*Conference Chair*)

Professionals reflected that hybrid formats appeared to increase the likelihood of passive acquiescence, with professionals signalling agreement without fully engaging in discussions that underpin safeguarding decisions. Reports of professionals checking emails, engaging in conversations with colleagues, or joining from unsuitable environments were perceived as undermining expectations of confidentiality and focus during conferences. Such practices were seen as potentially affecting families' confidence in the seriousness and integrity of the conference process. These observations suggest that hybrid conferencing does not simply affect who attends conferences but may reshape the interactional conditions under which information is interpreted and professional judgements about safeguarding are formed. In addition to these general risks, professionals identified concerns associated with specific conference configurations.

Relational asymmetry in parent-online configurations

Across the regional workshops, practitioners expressed concern that hybrid conferencing could disrupt relational processes. However, the nature and extent of these risks varied across the six configurations of conferencing described above. The most significant relational concerns arose in configurations where parents attended conferences online while most of the professionals were present together in-person (Type 3), or where parents participated through different modes of attendance (Type 5). In these situations, parents appeared on screen while others interacted together in the room, potentially creating an unintended 'us versus them' dynamic.

Such configurations may also reshape power relations within conferences, influencing how scrutiny is experienced and how parents' contributions are received. In so doing, they may concentrate authority among professionals attending in-person while positioning parents participating online as more peripheral to the discussions.

Conference chairs emphasized that supporting parents during conferences often involved subtle relational work, including reassurance, checking understanding, and informal conversation before or during the meeting. This support was more difficult to provide when parents participated online.

[Chairs] might need to encourage [parents] to rejoin the conference and get their views across ... I can leave the professionals in the room, go out to a parent and spend time with them ... give some comfort ... whatever they might need. I find that really difficult when we've got parents joining virtually ... (*Conference Chair*)

While online attendance could sometimes reduce the emotional exposure associated with being physically present in the meeting, participants also suggested that it might increase parents' sense of isolation during difficult discussions. Split-family conferences (type five) where family members participate through different modes (e.g. one parent online, one in person) were valued for split conferences and domestic abuse cases, enabling parents to participate safely when physical separation was required due to safety risks, bail conditions, or the sharing of third-party information. In these cases, participants tended to focus on examples where fathers attended online while mothers attended in-person. Such arrangements could create inequalities. For example, one social worker described a conference in which the father's poor internet connection effectively 'cut him off', reducing his visibility and 'biasing' the group towards the child's mother who attended in person. Conversely, other professionals reported that hybrid arrangements could enhance fathers' engagement, allowing online participation around work commitments. These patterns suggest that gendered expectations around parenting may influence who participates in person and who joins online in Type 5 conferences.

Relational fragmentation in anchored hybrid configurations

Hybrid configurations where parents attended in person while some professionals joined online (Types 2 and 4) presented a different set of relational challenges. Although parents were physically present, the professionals most closely involved in their lives, for example teachers or mental health practitioners, were not always among those attending in-person. Participants emphasized that physical co-presence supports small, but meaningful, moments of relational connection during difficult discussions, including gestures of reassurance or brief informal conversations. Where professionals

participated online, these opportunities for spontaneous relational interaction were reduced.

It's not being relational. I think that's the difficulty ... It's just that stroke on the shoulder to say it's all right, we get it ... that's what we lose having it as hybrid. (*Principal Social Worker*)

Participants suggested that the presence of both in-person and online participants could subtly reshape the emotional tone of the meeting, making conferences feel more formal or procedural. The prevailing view among participants was that hybrid conferencing is here to stay as a matter of necessity due to post-pandemic working arrangements, so many regarded type two conferences as the best compromise given these constraints.

Fully online conferencing and relational distance

Fully online conferences (Type 6) represent the far end of the participation continuum, with all participants joining online and physical co-presence absent. This format was widely used during the pandemic but had become less common in many areas by the time of the study and was used mainly for review conferences.

Practitioners noted that fully online conferences could reduce practical barriers to attendance and enable participation by professionals who might otherwise be unable to attend. However, participants also described challenges associated with the reduced opportunities to pick up on and respond to relational cues; technological mediation—where communication is shaped by video platforms, screens and microphones rather than face-to-face interaction—and the difficulty of providing emotional support to parents participating online:

Back in the day ... actually the real work started after a conference ... those families ... they've just gone through a really stressful experience, but you were able to then talk through in that kind of soft conversation way what's going to happen next. But now it's if it is a virtual meeting ... families aren't afforded opportunity to have those debriefing moments. (*Conference Chair*)

Without the shared physical environment of the conference room, discussions could feel more formal and less responsive to the emotional dynamics of the meeting, potentially shaping how participants engaged with and responded to the information being discussed.

Workshops to case studies

The findings from the regional workshops highlight substantial variation in how conferences are organized and suggest that different configurations

may have significant implications for participation and decision-making. These insights inform the design of the second stage of the study. While the first stage mapped variation in implementation and developed a typology of conferencing formats, it did not examine how these arrangements are enacted in practice. The case study phase, commencing mid-2026, will therefore test these findings, examining how hybrid configurations shape interaction, participation and professional judgement within conferences. The typology developed from the workshop data provides an analytic framework for this phase, informing but not dictating the sampling of case study sites.

Discussion

Structured multi-agency meetings and case conferences are a feature of many child welfare systems internationally, although their format and procedures vary across jurisdictions. The growth of hybrid working as a post-pandemic phenomenon (Behan-Devlin 2024) has introduced new possibilities for how such meetings are conducted. Previous research has examined the implications of hybrid working for social work practice with families (Pink et al. 2022), workforce wellbeing and working patterns among child protection social workers (Daley 2023; Jeyasingham and Devlin 2024). These existing conceptualizations of hybrid practices have tended to focus on professionals moving between online and in-person environments. This research extends this conceptualization of hybrid by showing that hybridity may exist within a single event—where some participants participate in-person, some online and in different combinations. This change raises new questions about equity and participation for both families and professionals joining in different modes.

Existing research on child protection conferences has focused on fully online conferences during the COVID-19 pandemic (Baginsky et al. 2020). The present study is the first to explore hybrid conferencing. The findings demonstrate that hybrid conferencing should not be understood as a single model of practice, but as a spectrum of configurations each creating distinct relational conditions and implications for interaction and decision-making. As such, these findings may be useful for local authorities in defining their current practice and evaluating its impact. The typology and associated concept of relational conditions may also provide a useful theoretical framework for conceptualizing the impact of hybrid practices on child protection decision-making, not only in England but also in other countries where hybrid working practices are increasing.

Sociomaterial perspectives suggest that technologies are not neutral tools but actively shape communication, interaction and participation within professional settings (Orlikowski 2007; Leonardi and Treem 2012). Extending this perspective, the present study demonstrates that hybrid

conferencing is not simply a technological or organizational adjustment but involves a spectrum of relational and material arrangements that reconfigure the environments in which professional judgement is formed. In this sense, hybrid conferencing can be understood as reshaping the ecology of judgement (Helm and Roesch-Marsh 2017) with potentially important implications for decision-making in child welfare.

Reviews of serious cases involving children known to services have repeatedly highlighted that information sharing alone is insufficient for effective interprofessional communication and decision-making (Dickens *et al.* 2022). Professionals must also interpret how information is understood by others in the meeting and translate specialist knowledge into forms that are meaningful across disciplinary boundaries. This process requires discussion and collaborative interpretation. The analysis presented here suggests that some hybrid configurations may disrupt these discursive processes. In conferences where professionals participated partly online and partly in person (Types 2 and 4), practitioners described a tendency for online participants to deliver reports sequentially without fully engaging in discussion. Although hybrid formats can facilitate broader professional attendance, they may also encourage a more procedural model of information sharing, limiting opportunities for collaborative sense-making.

Other configurations raise different concerns. Where parents participate online while professionals are physically co-present (Type 3), or where family members attend through different modes of attendance (Type 5), the conference can create relational asymmetries that shape how professional contributions are experienced by families. In such configurations, parents may appear alone on screen while professionals interact collectively in the room, potentially intensifying perceptions of scrutiny and limiting opportunities for informal dialogue. In this sense, hybrid conferencing may reproduce or amplify existing institutional power asymmetries within child protection processes.

Relational work by professionals is widely recognized as central to effective child protection practice with families (Ferguson *et al.* 2020) and child protection conferences are often emotionally demanding encounters for parents requiring effective advocacy and support. Previous research has shown that parents may experience conferences as intimidating settings in which they feel judged, criticized or insufficiently prepared to participate (Smithson and Gibson 2017; Muench *et al.* 2017). The findings from this scoping project suggest that hybrid conferencing may further complicate these relational dynamics. Although hybrid formats can widen opportunities for attendance, for example by enabling family members to join online, attendance alone may not necessarily translate into meaningful engagement. More broadly, hybrid environments may inadvertently privilege the voices of those physically present in the room, particularly during fast-moving discussions. Without careful facilitation and preparation, these dynamics risk reinforcing existing power imbalances within the conference process.

Current reforms

The child protection system in England is currently undergoing significant reform, including the introduction of multi-agency child protection teams (MACPTs) responsible for overseeing child protection conferences and ensuring that practitioners from different agencies are involved ([Department for Education 2026c](#)) and changes to chairing arrangements. These reforms emphasize the importance of ensuring that ‘the right practitioners are present’ at conferences ([Department for Education 2026c](#)). Crucially, our findings suggest that the *mode* of attendance may be as important as who attends. Different conferencing configurations create distinct relational and deliberative conditions that influence how decisions are reached. However, current policy guidance provides limited clarity about when hybrid or in-person formats may be most appropriate. This raises questions about the extent to which conferencing formats are shaped by organizational constraints, rather than the relational needs of children and families. It may suggest a need for clearer guidance on when particular conferencing formats are appropriate, and for greater attention to how hybrid arrangements may affect procedural fairness and family participation.

Conference chairs remain central to facilitating participation and managing discussion within conferences. However, their ability to manage hybrid environments is often shaped by local organizational norms and resource constraints. Supporting those responsible for chairing conferences—through appropriate technological infrastructure, administrative assistance, and training in managing hybrid meetings—may therefore be critical in mitigating the risks identified in this study.

Strengths and limitations

This stage of the research makes two contributions to what is known about child protection decision-making. First, it provides the first national picture of how hybrid child protection conferences have been implemented across England. Second, it develops a typology of conferencing configurations. By distinguishing between different forms of hybrid conferences, the typology offers an analytic framework for examining how hybridity may reshape the relational and decision-making conditions under which professional judgements are formed.

The study has limitations. The analysis presented here draws on practitioners’ perspectives as the focus is on patterns of implementation across local authorities. This will inform the sampling strategy for stage two, which will include observations across the full range of conference types identified here. In parallel, we are currently undertaking a similar scoping exercise with parents who have experienced child protection conferences post-pandemic. This work is ongoing, and parents’ voices will equally shape the design of stage two, particularly the development of the

conference observation protocol, schedules and approach for follow-up interviews with parents and professionals.

More broadly, it is recognized that there may be differences between practitioners' *accounts* of practice, and practice as it is enacted (Ferguson 2016). The subsequent ethnographic stage of this research will address this gap by observing child protection conferences as they occur and undertaking follow-up interviews with professionals and parents. This will enable comparison between parents and professionals' perceptions of specific conferences *and* practice as it is enacted.

Conclusion

This article provides an initial national analysis of the implementation of hybrid conferences and contributes insight into how hybrid conferencing practices may shape participation and decision-making. The findings indicate that hybrid conferencing is not a single or uniform practice. Instead, a range of conferencing configurations emerged across England, reflecting different patterns of physical and virtual participation among professionals and families. Local authorities appear to have developed hybridity in different ways, often pragmatically and without clear national guidance regarding when particular formats may be most appropriate.

The six-type typology developed in this study shows that these configurations form a continuum between fully in-person and fully online conferences. Crucially, the typology highlights that the relational and decision-making conditions of conferences may be shaped not only by who attends but by how participants are spatially arranged across in-person and online environments. The next stage of the study will test this by examining how these configurations operate in practice. Understanding how hybrid arrangements influence interaction and participation is important for ensuring that child protection conferences continue to function as effective forums for collective decision-making and family engagement.

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