

Cumbria Safeguarding
Children Partnership



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Child Protection Conferences

A guide for parents



What is Child Protection?

This booklet explains the procedure agreed by Cumbria Safeguarding Children Partnership (CSCP) for dealing with child protection cases. Cumbria is committed to working with families in an open and honest way.

A Social Worker from the Children and Families Services will have explained things to you but we realise that it is sometimes difficult to take everything in at once. We hope that this booklet will be of help.

If there is anything that you do not understand, please ask. We find parents usually do have questions and our staff are used to answering them. If we don't have the answers, we will try to find someone who does.

What is Child Protection?

Children and Families Services have a legal duty to investigate situations where there are concerns that a child may be "significantly harmed". This means that if they receive an allegation that a child is being abused or neglected, they are required to make enquiries (known as 'Section 47' enquiries) about that child's wellbeing and safety.

Referrals may be received from professionals, such as health visitors or teachers but also from neighbours, relatives and friends. Sometimes a referral is received directly from a parent or indeed the child.

Members of the public have a right to request that their identity be protected, and in such cases, we would be unable to tell you who made the referral. Normally, there would be no reason why you should not know the name of the professional who made the referral.



How Children and Families Services make enquiries into a child protection referral

The investigation of Child Protection is a shared responsibility. Each agency – the Police, Children and Families Services, GPs, Schools etc – has agreed procedures, which it must follow. These procedures are to be found on Cumbria Safeguarding Children Partnership internet website: www.cumbriasafeguardingchildren.co.uk/

Children and Families Services investigate by sharing information and working together with other agencies concerned with the welfare of children. The Social Worker will visit you at home and will see the child who is subject of concern and any brother or sisters. They will want to speak to them alone.

Any child protection investigation is inevitably going to cause some distress but investigations are carefully planned to try and minimise this.

Information relating to a child protection investigation is highly confidential and will not be shared with anyone who does not need to know. The Social Worker has a responsibility to ensure that you are aware of your rights and that you are informed and consulted at every stage. They will always work with you in an honest and transparent way.

What Happens Next?

Following a Children and Families Services enquiry, a number of different things may happen:

- 1 Children and Families Services may conclude that there is no cause for concern and in that case the matter will be closed.
- 2 The Social Worker may make an assessment that your child is not at risk of significant harm but your family may benefit from the provision of services, either from Children and Families Services or another agency. These services are offered on an entirely voluntary basis which you do not have to accept but doing so would be in the best interests of your family.
- 3 The Social Worker may assess that there is a significant risk to your child and in this case will want to work together with you to help minimise that risk. Depending upon a number of factors, a Child Protection Conference may be convened. Where the Social Worker does consider your child to be at risk of significant harm, they have a duty and power to ensure that the safety of the child is protected. These powers are subject to the Court's direction and parents and children have rights of representation and challenge. The Social Worker will advise you of your rights in all circumstances.

Even where the Social Worker believes the child is at risk of significant harm, the policy of Cumbria Safeguarding Children Partnership is that agencies should work in partnership with you as a family.



What is a Child Protection Conference?

This is a formal meeting where parents, the social worker, family members and other professionals who have direct involvement with your family come together to discuss the concerns and decide what to do to keep your child safe from harm. There may be other professionals present whom you will not know, for example, the police attend all Initial Child Protection Case Conferences.

Parents are a very important part of a Child Protection Conference and we strongly recommend that you attend. Your attendance means that you will be able to hear directly from conference members why they are concerned about your child and whether they think a formal Child Protection Plan is necessary. It is important that your views are heard and you will be encouraged to contribute to the discussion.

The purpose of a Conference is:

- To share information
- To identify problems your family may be experiencing
- To assess the level of risk (if any) to a child
- To decide whether or not a formal Child Protection Plan is necessary in order to safeguard a child
- To recommend the appropriate actions to be taken.

The people who will be involved in the Conference may include:

- Social Workers
- Health Visitors
- Doctor (GP and/or of hospital)
- Teachers
- Police
- Probation

In Cumbria, Child Protection Conferences are chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer on behalf of Cumbria Safeguarding Children Partnership. This person acts independently of any agency. The only decision which can be made at a Child Protection Conference is whether or not to put in place a formal Child Protection Plan for a child. There are strict criteria to be met before a child can be made subject to such a plan. The chair of the Conference will explain these criteria.

A Child Protection Conference can, however, also make recommendations about services which should be provided to your family in order to help you and ensure that your child's wellbeing is safeguarded.

Before the conference

You will be asked to arrive in good time before the Conference is due to begin so that you can meet with the Conference Chair. This is to give the Chair the opportunity to check with you that you have received any available reports, to talk through how the meeting will run and to help you make the best contribution you can to the Conference.

If you are to get the best value out of meeting with the chair, it is important that you arrive at the time requested. Chairs are expected to start the Conference on time and if you arrive late, there will be less opportunity for your discussion.

Will I be able to stay throughout the conference?

This very much depends on the particular circumstances. The general principle is to work with families by involving them as much as possible in issues which affect them. However, professional staff must have a separate opportunity to share and analyse key information about a child's safety and welfare and also, where necessary, seek legal advice. This means that although you will be present throughout the majority of the Conference, you may be asked to leave for a short time before being invited back. There are situations, outlined below, which require the chair either to exclude you from a Child Protection Conference, or ask you to leave for a short period. These are:

- Where there are justifiable reasons to believe your presence will not be in the child's interests;
- Where there is evidence that you may present a risk of violence to Conference members;
- Where the child does not want the parent/carer present;
- When personal information is to be given about a family member which Conference needs to hear, but which it is reasonable that others should not know;
- To accommodate the wishes of a parent/carer who does not wish to be in the presence of an ex-partner. The Conference Chair will decide if such a request is appropriate in each case;
- When information from a referrer is to be given, which if shared would disclose the identity of that person;
- When personal information is to be shared which an agency is required in law or under Codes of Practice not to divulge in a particular circumstance;
- When there is an ongoing investigation and the disclosure of information would interfere with this.

What should I do if I don't want my partner to know something about my past?

If the Conference is concerned about your child, either because you have been convicted of an offence against children or you are believed to be a risk to children in some way, your partner will probably have been told of this by the Social Worker after discussion with you.

However, most other information about your past is confidential to you and should not need to be shared. You must advise the professional working with you before the Conference if there is something you do not want your partner to know.

Can I bring someone with me to the conference?

Yes. You can bring a friend, relative or solicitor to help you explain your views. A Child Protection Conference is not a court hearing, however, and if you ask your solicitor to attend with you, he or she can act only as a friend or supporter. In most circumstances your solicitor will not be permitted to speak in the Conference: he or she will be there to offer you support and to observe.

The Child Protection Conference will be sharing some personal information about your child and the Conference chair will therefore want to establish with you that your child does not have objections to the particular supporter you have brought hearing this information. Where a child does object, then that child's wishes are paramount.

A solicitor, who is acting for you in care proceedings and also attends the Conference, will receive a separate copy of the Conference minutes.

Can my child attend?

Usually yes, however, it may not always be in the best interests of a child to attend a Conference and their attendance should be discussed with the Social Worker. If your child is aged 11 or older a worker from NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service) will usually have contacted you in advance of the meeting to be an advocate for your child - they can support your child to attend or attend on their behalf or meet with your child and pass on their views wishes and feelings to the conference chair.

Babies and young children are not able to attend Conferences and therefore you will need to make arrangements for them to be looked after during this time. Please let your Social Worker know if you are finding difficulties in making such arrangements.

Conference agenda

- 1 Attendance Register
- 2 Meeting Arrangements (Fire Exits etc.)
- 3 Introductions
- 4 State and check family details
- 5 Outline by chairperson of format, scope and purpose of meeting
- 6 Report from Social Worker on background leading to conference
- 7 Reports from involved agencies
- 8 Chairperson's summary of what's working well, what we are worried about and what needs to happen
- 9 Discussion and decision about whether the child is at continuing risk of significant harm in the future and needs to be subject of a Child Protection Plan

If a formal Child Protection Plan is required

- 1 Discussion of Outline Child Protection Plan.** This will involve looking at the specific needs of your child, how these are going to be addressed, who needs to do what and when.
- 2 Membership of Core Group.** The Conference will then agree a key worker to work with your family, this will always be a Social Worker and then set up a "Core Group". This is a group of key people involved with your child, whose task is to ensure that the Conference recommendations are carried out. A date for the first Core Group will be agreed at the Conference and must be held within ten working days. You will be invited to be a member of the Core Group. Subsequent Core Groups will take place at least every four weeks.

If there is not to be a formal Child Protection Plan

- 1 Discussion and decision on any ongoing support and liaison to support your child and family.** If it is felt your child does not meet the criteria for a formal Child Protection Plan, you will be offered support through a Child in Need Plan. A Review Conference will be held within 3 months after the Initial Conference to assess what progress has been made and to consider whether your child needs to remain subject to a Child Protection Plan. If a formal Child Protection Plan continues to be necessary, a Conference will be held within 6 months.

How will I know what the conference decision is?

If you attend the Conference, you will hear what decision is made. If you are unable to attend, or are present for only part of the time, either:

- The chair will inform you of the decision and recommendations at the end of the child protection Conference, or
- The Social Worker will visit you to let you know what these are. In any event, the chair will write to you to confirm the decisions and recommendations of the Conference and you will receive a copy of the full minutes, excluding any confidential sections.

What if you are not happy with the conference decision?

Talk to the chair of the Conference who will be discuss this matter with you and, if necessary, provide you with a copy of the Complaints Procedure. The CSCP has a policy on this and it can be found here...

http://cumbrialscb.proceduresonline.com/chapters/p_complaints.html?zoom_highlight=complaints

If you want to complain about the quality of service offered by a particular professional, then each agency has its own complaints procedure and will provide you with details upon request.

Monitoring of the service

In Cumbria we are constantly striving to improve the quality of the service we can offer children and families. Periodically, we send out questionnaires to parents and children to ask their views about our service(s). Should you receive a questionnaire, please take time to read it, answer the questions and return it in the prepaid envelope provided. Your answers will be treated in confidence and will be helpful in planning services in the future.

Finally...

Our first duty is to make sure that children are kept safe. We try to do this by working in partnership with parents. If there are concerns for your child, we will tell you honestly what these are and what needs to change for the concerns to lessen. We want to work with you because in our experience we have found that working closely with families leads to better results for all involved.

