



# Complete Guide to Working with Social Services

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### Introduction

Having a letter arrive on your doorstep from social services or a call from a social worker light up your phone can provoke a real sense of anxiety as a parent. That's because there's a common misconception that social services involvement can only end badly. You may fear that something drastic is about to happen – such as your child being suddenly taken away from the family home and placed in the care of a third party.

In truth, social services perform a range of functions. They're a department within the local authority and have a broad remit. Their primary role is to ensure the wellbeing of children and vulnerable adults within the local area.

Keeping children safe from abuse and neglect and ensuring they have the right level of care for their needs could entail anything from providing access to additional resources or connecting local families with other services – such as drug addiction counselling substance misuse intervention or mental health support.



It's important to remember that social services can provide wide-ranging support, assistance and guidance. Your child would only ever be removed from your home if there was an urgent need to do so. That could be because they're facing immediate danger and need to be removed for their safety with a court order, or if you voluntarily agree that they can be placed in care.

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Common reasons for social services to become involved with your family include:

- If you've asked for additional support – this could be due to a family issue for example, or because your child is exhibiting problematic behaviour and you're unable to deal with it alone.
- If a third party (such as a teacher, medical professional or similar) has raised concerns about the safety or wellbeing of your child.
- As a result of domestic abuse.
- As a result of alcoholism or other substance abuse issues use within the home.
- Due to neglect.
- Because of emotional, physical or sexual abuse.
- As a result of a disability.



### **What Triggers a Social Services Assessment?**

Before social services becomes involved with your family, they'll first conduct an assessment to determine if their intervention is warranted. Of course, social services don't conduct assessments randomly, nor do they assess every family within the local authority catchment area.

An assessment will take place only after a referral is made. You could refer yourself to social services to access the additional support or resources you feel you need to cope with difficulties you're facing. Or more commonly, a third party such as your child's teacher, a medical professional, the police or even a neighbour could raise concerns that your child is being neglected, abused or is otherwise living in an unsafe environment – for example, because there is evidence of domestic violence, parental alienation or substance abuse.

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### **What Should Parents Expect During a Social Services Assessment?**

First and foremost, it can be helpful to consider a social services assessment as a fact finding mission. Its purpose isn't to gather evidence against you. Rather, social services are trying to understand exactly what the situation is within the home and what risks your child may be facing.

An assessment will be carried out within 45 days of the date social services receive a referral about your child (unless there is an immediate risk). You should expect to be visited by a social worker. He or she will outline what the areas of concern are and will need to speak with your child in a private setting.

During the assessment period, the social worker may also speak with other people with knowledge of your child, such as their teacher or GP. Part of the assessment will be spent determining what your child needs and whether those needs are being met.

After the assessment, the social worker may well conclude that your child is safe and his or her needs are being met, in which case there will be no further action taken. They could class your child as 'In Need' which means additional intervention is required but no immediate danger exists. They may also conclude that there is an immediate risk of harm, in which case a meeting will be called to decide on the next steps.



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### **What Are The Key Roles and Responsibilities of Social Services?**

As we mentioned earlier, the roles and responsibilities of social services are varied. That's because their overarching concern is ensuring the safety and wellbeing of young children and vulnerable adults. To meet that remit, they provide a diverse collection of solutions and services and will work with local families in a range of ways to provide both emotional and practical support.

The NHS has a good definition of what social workers do. It says, "Social workers make a difference to individuals and families by helping them live their lives more successfully."

If you're reading this guide because you're feeling anxious about social services' involvement with your family, it may help to remember that their main motivator is to help. They exist to help children grow up in a suitable, healthy and safe environment where their physical, emotional, and educational needs are met. They also have the best interests of your child at heart and will only become involved where there is cause for concern. The ambition of every professional working with the family is to ensure the child is safe at home, if at all possible.



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Social workers are regulated by the Children and Social Work Act 2017. It sets out a series of provisions to better safeguard children. To that end, the key roles and responsibilities of social services can be defined as:

- To offer support to local families.
- To safeguard the wellbeing of children where there are concerns they may be a victim of neglect.
- To ensure the safety and wellbeing of children who have previously experienced abuse, or are currently at risk of being sexually, emotionally, physically or mentally abused.
- To ensure local children receive the health, education and other professional services they may need.
- To help families who find themselves experiencing difficulties to navigate the issue while prioritising the wellbeing of the child.
- To develop care plans to help families better meet the needs of children who are at risk of abuse or neglect.
- To enable access to support and resources for children and their families. This includes facilitating access to other agencies and services where there are behavioural or other issues such as a disability or mental health challenges.
- To intervene and advocate on behalf of the child when they are at risk or their needs aren't being met.



### **What Rights and Responsibilities Do Parents Have When Social Services are Involved?**

There's no question that dealing with social services for the first time can be enormously stressful. Again, it's important to remember that social services can't just swoop in and remove your child from the family home. They share your commitment to seeing your child grow up in a safe space where their needs are met, and their welfare is a key priority.

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You may fear the involvement of social services with your family due to stories passed along the grapevine from friends or neighbours, or due to outdated tales of children being taken from the family home and placed in care. Please keep in mind that that isn't a realistic portrayal of how the modern social service system works and that as a parent (or someone with parental responsibility) you have a voice. You also have your own unique set of rights and responsibilities as a parent when social services connect with your family. This means you can advocate for your child and your family during interactions with social services.

### **Child Protection Plan**

A child protection plan is a plan drawn up by social services which sets out how a child can be better protected from the risk of harm. This plan will often be created before social services initiate care proceedings. Before the plan is drawn up, you'll be invited to attend a Child Protection Conference. This is a meeting which gives you, your child's social worker and other stakeholders a chance to assess your child's situation and then create a plan to address any concerns and make improvements where necessary.

The point of this meeting is to ensure the welfare and safety of your child so it's important to go into it with an open mind and a willingness to speak up. You'll be asked to participate and can provide your views and share your wishes regarding your child's welfare during the meeting. Keep in mind that this meeting seeks to create a safer and more appropriate environment for your child, so you have both a duty and a right to share your experiences, express your wishes and give your feedback on what's being suggested.

### **Care Proceedings**

If social services are concerned about the safety and wellbeing of your child, for example due to domestic violence or neglect within the home, they may initiate care proceedings. An application will be made to the family court, so that a judge can determine whether or not a legal order is required to keep your child safe.

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That application will be accompanied by a report which outlines why social services believes legal intervention is required. The process is:

1. Social services make an application to the family court.
- 2.2. An Emergency Protection Order or an Interim Care Order may be sought if social services want your child to live elsewhere while the care proceedings progress. This stage is accompanied by a care plan which outlines where the child should live during court proceedings and how often they should have parental contact.
- 3.3. A First Hearing will be held, followed by a Case Management Hearing takes place, to discuss expert assessments and other reports, and any other evidence that might be required.
- 4.4. An Issues Resolution Hearing will then take place once the expert reports have been received. Here, parties will attempt to reach an agreement on details such as where the child will live. If this is not possible, then the hearing will be used to check that the case is ready for a final hearing.
- 5.5. A Final Hearing will be held so the Judge can make a final decision in respect of the child to decide what should happen.

You'll be able to attend the court hearings and can share your views. You'll also be able to retain the services of a family solicitor to represent you in court. Legal aid is available.

With the help of your solicitor, you can submit evidence to the Court, alongside written statements. Your solicitor will help you have your voice heard as to what you consider is best for your child.



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### **Supervision Orders**

If the family court makes a Supervision Order, you'll retain parental responsibility for your child – but social services will take on a supervisory role. This means they'll be in regular contact with you and your child. They'll befriend your child, advise and assist them, but you'll still be ultimately responsible for decision making. You should expect to have regular meetings with your social worker and social services and can provide feedback, make requests and suggestions during these sessions.

### **Care Orders**

If the family court makes a Care Order, it means that the Local Authority shares parental responsibility with anyone who already has it. The Court will be asked at the same time to approve a Care Plan which will likely be placement outside of the family, for example, in long-term foster care or a residential placement. The Local Authority will be responsible for the decision making in respect of the child but will still have a duty to inform you and matters such as contact will be kept under review.

## **What Legal and Support Options are Available to Families Navigating Social Services Intervention?**

The intervention of social services can be enormously worrying but you don't need to face this situation alone. A family solicitor can provide impartial advice to help you achieve the best possible outcome for your family. They can represent you during care proceedings and provide practical help to complete all necessary paperwork such as statements required by the court.

As a parent dealing with social services, you may also be eligible for legal aid to help you meet the financial costs of legal representation. We can help you to understand if you're eligible, and to what extent, and guide you through the next steps if required.

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Seeking legal advice as soon as social services become involved with your family is the best course of action. It will better equip you to deal with what comes next, remove any uncertainty and give you a clear idea of the best course of action.

### **How Can Families Effectively Communicate and Cooperate with Social Services to Ensure The Best Outcomes?**

Having a cooperative and collaborative relationship with social services is one of the best ways to ensure the best outcome for your family. Central to that is strong communication. It may help to remember that you share a joint desire to ensure your child is safe and well and that their needs are being met. Use that as a basis for honest, open and respectful communication. While it can be hard to put emotions aside, speaking calmly and being open to the opinions of others is vital to nurturing trust and mutual respect.

**To find out more about child arrangement orders, get in touch with us today on 0203 601 505, or email us at [info@nationallegalservice.co.uk](mailto:info@nationallegalservice.co.uk)**