Darlington Safeguarding Partnership

Continuum of Need

Thresholds for Help, Support and Protection

Aligned with the Families First Partnership Programme | June 2026

How to use this document

This continuum is a tool to support professional judgement and conversation - not a checklist or a scoring matrix. No single indicator determines what a child needs. Threshold decisions in Darlington are relational and conversational.

The question is never ***'does this family meet threshold?'*** The question is: ***'what does this child need, and what are we going to do about it?'***

A child's position on this continuum is not fixed. Needs change. Movement between levels should be fluid, timely and led by the child's experience - not by agency capacity or administrative process.

Best Start Family Hubs

Darlington's Family Hub Offer

Darlington's Best Start Family Hubs are the community heart of this continuum - a welcoming, accessible space where any family can walk in without a referral and find support from pregnancy through to age 19 (25 for young people with SEND).

Family Hubs sit within the Universal & Community level and act as a natural bridge into Family Help where additional needs are identified. They are not a gateway or a threshold; they are a place where families are welcomed and helped to find what they need.

- No referral needed - any family can access support
- Parenting support, early years activities and health services under one roof
- Speech and language, specialist groups and evidence-based early intervention
- A dedicated SEND practitioner for early identification and support
- Connection to Family Help Lead Practitioners where needs emerge
- Links to community, health and voluntary sector services across Darlington

McNay Street Family Hub, Darlington, DL36SW, opening hours: Monday to Friday 9-4:30

See Darlington BC - Best Start in Life plan

Universal & Community

Who this is for

Most children and families in Darlington. Needs are being met through mainstream universal services. No additional needs have been identified and no referral is required.

This level also includes children and families receiving a little more from a universal practitioner - a health visitor doing extra contacts with a new parent, a school providing pastoral support, a GP linking a family to a community resource. The practitioner is doing more but no formal plan is needed.

What universal services include

- GP, midwife, health visitor, school nurse and community health services
- Schools and early years settings
- Best Start Family Hub - a welcoming, no-referral-needed space for families from pregnancy to age 19 (25 for SEND)
- Voluntary sector, community groups and faith organisations
- Housing, benefits and employment advice

What this means for practitioners

Continue to provide universal services as normal. Use your professional judgement. If something doesn't feel right, do a little more - talk to the child and family, share your concern with a colleague or safeguarding lead, and stay connected. You do not need to refer to escalate your attention.

The conversation to have:

'Is there anything you or your family need support with now? Do you know what's available in Darlington to help?'

Family Help

Who this is for

Children and families where additional needs have been identified that cannot be met through universal services alone - and children who meet the threshold for Child in Need (Section 17, Children Act 1989). Family Help is a single, seamless offer that brings together what was previously called targeted early help and child in need work.

This may include families where: a child is showing signs of developmental delay or emotional difficulties; a parent is struggling with mental health, substance use or financial pressures; a child has complex or multiple needs requiring a coordinated multi-agency response; or where a number of smaller concerns together suggest the family needs sustained, coordinated support.

What Family Help means

A named Lead Practitioner — who can be from any agency, including a health visitor, school nurse, teacher, early years worker or social worker — coordinates a Family Help Assessment and plan with the family. The Lead Practitioner is chosen because of their relationship with the family, not because of which agency they work for.

Within Family Help, the intensity of support will vary. Some families need light-touch coordination; others need an intensive multi-agency response. Movement between these levels of intensity is fluid and does not require a re-referral. The plan evolves; it does not restart.

What this means for practitioners

- A Family Help Assessment is completed with the family, not done to them
- Team Around the Family (TAF) meetings and Child in Need (CIN) meetings are offered where more than one practitioner is involved depending on support needs
- Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) is offered to help the family identify and mobilise their own network
- Family Networks - extended family, friends and community connections - are identified and engaged and supported including through Family network support packages.
- No re-referral is needed to increase or decrease the intensity of support within Family Help

The conversation to have:

'We'd like to work with you and your family to understand what's getting in the way of things feeling better. We want to hear what matters to you, find out who else in your life might be able to help, and make a plan together.'

Safeguarding & Child Protection

Who this is for

Children who are at risk of significant harm or who are experiencing abuse or neglect. This level requires immediate action.

If you believe a child is in immediate danger, do not wait - call 999. If you have a safeguarding concern, contact the Children Initial Advice team (CIAT) on 01325 406252. Do not let uncertainty about threshold delay a referral. If in doubt, consult.

What happens at this level

Where there is reasonable cause to suspect a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm a dedicated Lead Child Protection Practitioner is allocated and coordinates the response through the Multi-Agency Child Protection Team (MACPT) alongside the Family Help Lead Practitioner.

The MACPT brings together professionals from across agencies. Decision-making is shared, coordinated and transparent. The child's safety is the central focus of all activity - but the family's strengths and network are still part of the conversation.

Parental Advice and Guidance.

Parents and carers involved in the child protection processes can find information about the process their Rights and Entitlement at https://www.darlington.gov.uk/children-and-young-people/childrens-social-care/child-protection/

Family Group Decision Making

FGDM should be offered as good practice at levels of support as early as possible however it is now mandatory at the pre-proceedings stage to enable the family's network to explore whether there are solutions that can keep the child safe. Darlington is a system that believes in families even at the most difficult moments.

Continuing universal and Family Help support

A child subject to a Child Protection Plan does not stop being a child who needs school, health care and community connection. Universal services and Family Help continue alongside child protection activity. Practitioners at all levels have a role.

Contact

- CIAT (during office hours): 01325 406252
- Out of hours emergency duty: 01642 524552
- Emergency: 999

The conversation to have:

'I am concerned about your child's safety, and I have a responsibility to act on that. I want to be honest with you about what I'm doing and why. I also want to make sure you have support through this — including access to an independent advocate who is there just for you.'

Key Principles

Family Help is one seamless offer

Targeted early help and Child in Need are both Family Help. Step up and step-down takes place within Family Help - no re-referral is needed. The Lead Practitioner stays with the family. The plan evolves; it does not restart.

The Lead Practitioner can be from any Relevant Discipline

In the future a health visitor, school nurse, teacher or early years worker can and should lead Family Help where they have the best relationship with the family. This role is not determined by agency.

Lead Child Protection Practitioner and MACPT

At the Safeguarding & Child Protection level, a dedicated Lead Child Protection Practitioner coordinates the response through the Multi-Agency Child Protection Team (MACPT). Child protection activity is skilled, joined-up and child-focused.

Parental Advice and Guidance

Parents and carers involved in child protection processes will be offered advice support and guidance to help them participate fully and have their voice heard throughout.

Family Group Decision Making and Family Networks

FGDM should be offered at every level. Families should be supported to identify and mobilise their own network from the very start - not as a last resort. Family networks are a protective factor, not an afterthought.

Full delivery by 1 April 2027

Full delivery of the Families First Partnership model in Darlington will be in place by 1 April 2027. This document will be formally reviewed at that point.

This document should be read alongside Darlington's local Family Help protocols and Darlington Safeguarding Partnership procedures. | Review date: April 2027