DARLINGTON
Borough Council

We are worried about your child

A guide to the child protection investigation process for parents and carers

Social Worker/Family Help Practitioner:.....

Telephone number: .....

Email address:.....

This guide is for you if a professional has told you that children's services are looking into worries about your child. This is called a Section 47 enquiry.

We understand that hearing this can feel scary or confusing. This page will explain what is happening and tell you about your rights in a clear and simple way.

Why are we undertaking enquires?

Darlington Children Services has a legal duty to make sure that all children in Darlington are safe and protected. If Children's Services receive information that a child may be at risk of harm, we must look into it.

This is called a child protection enquiry or a Section 47 enquiry. The name comes from the Children Act 1989, which says we must take action if we are worried about a child.

The child protection enquiry is to:

- Understand your family's life.
- Speak to your child(ren) on their own to understand what has happened and more about their life.
- Speak to you to understand what has happened, better understand you and talk through ideas you have to make the situation safer.
- Speak to members of your family who you identify as support, to see what they can do to help.
- Share ideas to make the situation safer.
- Ask for information about your family from other agencies.
- Write a report to evidence whether your child(ren) is or is not suffering significant harm or is likely to suffer significant harm.

If the information shared suggests that a crime may have been committed against your child or another person, a highly trained child protection police officer will want to speak to your child to gather any evidence. This will help the police with their investigation.

If your child has been a victim of a crime, their interview with the police may need to be video recorded, to make sure your child does not have to keep repeating their story.

Child protection medical:

If your child has been physically harmed or neglected, they may need to be examined by a consultant paediatrician, this is called a child protection medical. This may involve your child having an x-ray, MRI or alternative scan. Additionally, images may be taken of any marks or injuries.

Family network meeting:

While the child protection enquiry is taking place, you will be offered a family network meeting to try and involve your wider family in decision making and help to provide you with practical and financial support.

What will happen?

Your social worker will visit your home. Sometimes they will visit on their own, or with support from another professional. In some situations, the police may also be involved and may visit with them.

We will tell you why we are concerned about your child. The only time we may not do this is if telling you could put your child at greater risk.

Who will be working with your family?

A social worker will lead your child protection enquiry. They will be supported by a team manager.

Other professionals may also be involved, such as:

- a health worker
- a police officer
- a teacher

They all work together to help keep your child safe.

How long does it take?

The child protection enquiry should be completed within 15 working days of it starting.

What happens at the end?

There are four possible outcomes:

1. No further action

We have not found evidence that your child is at risk. Our involvement will end. We may suggest support if it could still help your family.

2. Family support is offered

We are not worried about your child's immediate safety, but support may help. You may be offered a Child in Need plan. This is voluntary (your choice). The focus is on helping your family, not investigating.

3. A child protection conference is needed

We have found concerns that need a formal meeting. This is called a child protection conference. See our leaflet 'Your Child Protection Conference' to find out what it is and what to expect.

4. Emergency protection or court proceedings

In serious and urgent situations, we may need to take legal action quickly to keep your child safe. If this applies to your family:

- we will explain this to you clearly
- you should get independent legal advice straight away
- you may be able to get free legal support (legal aid)

Child Abuse/ Harm Includes:

- **Physical abuse:** deliberately hurting a child e.g hitting, punching or physical chastisement, causing injuries such as bruises, broken bones or cuts.
- **Emotional abuse:** ongoing emotional cruelty to a child including rejection, constantly threating concretising a child so they feel unloved and worthless. This can also include exposure to domestic abuse in the home.
- **Sexual abuse:** forcing or persuading a child to take part in sexual activities, including inappropriate touching, kissing or sexual intercourse. This can also involve causing a child to look at pornographic material.
- **Exploitation:** using a child for gain, either sexual or criminal
- **Neglect:** failure to meet a child's basic daily needs including food, clothing, medical care, shelter, keeping them safe, education and nurturing.

Child protection enquiry

Step by step

Referral

A concern is raised about a child's safety or wellbeing.

Strategy meeting

Professionals meet to share information and decide what action is needed.

Enquiry

Information is gathered to understand the child's situation.

Conference

A child protection conference is held to decide the next steps.

Plan

A plan is put in place to support and protect the child and family.

Review

The plan is reviewed regularly to ensure it is working.

Your rights during this process

You have the right:

- to be told why Children's Services are concerned about your child.
- to share your views, have them listened to and have them taken seriously.
- to understand what needs to change to increase the safety for your child and what actions are expected of you to achieve this.
- to understand what action professionals are undertaking to increase safety for your child.
- to be treated with respect, whatever your background, race, religion, or disability.
- to receive written information about the process.
- to get independent advice by contacting ParentCarerAdvocacy@darlington.gov.uk.
- to speak to a solicitor.

Frequenty asked questions:

I'm worried that my child will be taken away:

This is a common worry for parents who's children are subject to a child protection enquiry.

Children Services have no legal powers to remove your child. Only a court (or in emergencies, the police) can do this, and this would only happen in the most serious circumstances where a child is at immediate risk of significant harm, which is rare.

We aim to work with families to keep children safe while they remain at home supported by their parents, carers and family networks. We will clearly explain what needs to change and how we will support you to make those changes.

Will this affect my other children, or children in my family?

Our priority is the safety of all children in your household. The enquiry will consider all children you have parental responsibility for, and we may need to speak to them as part of understanding your family's situation. This is because we have a duty to safeguard all children. We will always explain who we need to speak to and why.

Will my child be interviewed without me knowing?

We may need to speak to your child separately. This is to make sure they feel safe to share their views. We will always tell you this has happened unless doing so could put your child at greater risk.

Will this go on a permanent record?

Information gathered during a Section 47 enquiry is held securely by Children's Services. If no further action is taken, this information is retained but is not shared routinely. We can explain what information is held and how it is used.

Can I have a say in what happens?

Yes. Your views matter throughout this process. You will always be given the opportunity to share your perspective and respond to any concerns raised.

What if I disagree with the outcome?

You have the right to challenge any decision made. You can do this by speaking to your lead professional, contacting their manager, or making a formal complaint.

What if English is not my first language or I have a disability?

We will make sure you have the support you need to understand the process and take part fully. This could include an interpreter or communication support.

We want to hear from you

Our aim is to put you and your family first and provide you with the best possible service.

It is important that you have the opportunity to tell us what you think about the services we provide.

You can tell us when we get things right, make comments about the things we do and suggest new ways of doing things.

Your feedback helps us improve our services for all families.

You can also tell us when we get things wrong so we can put them right.

Using the council's complaints procedures is one way you can do this.

Most concerns can be resolved informally by speaking directly with the member of staff working with you, or their team manager. You can share your concerns with them and they will aim to resolve the issue by the end of the next working day.

You can make a compliment or a complaint using the contact details below.

- **Online:** use our online complaints form at darlington.gov.uk
- **Email:** complaints@darlington.gov.uk
- **Phone:** 01325 406777
- **In person:** Town Hall, Darlington, DL1 5QT

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