



Local authority children's social care thresholds

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The majority of children and young people in each local authority have a number of basic needs that can be supported through a range of universal services. These services include education, early years, health, housing, youth services, leisure facilities and services provided by voluntary organisations. However, some children have more complex needs and may need access to specialist services (e.g. LA children's social care) to support them.
- 1.2 Under the national Every Child Matters agenda, safeguarding children is everybody's business. An increased number of services working with children and young people has meant an increased number of referral pathways for services, and this document provides guidance about how thresholds affect the type of referrals accepted by local authority children's social care, and the main categories referrals fall into.
- 1.3 The term thresholds is used commonly by LA children's social care and other services, sometimes inconsistently. In this document, "threshold" refers to the point at which LA children's social care are likely to accept a referral for a child, young person or their family.
- 1.4 This guidance does not list specific criteria for receiving an assessment or service. Information about indicators for child protection responses are included in Section 6 of the *London Child Protection Procedures 2007* (these can be accessed at <http://www.londonscb.gov.uk/procedures/>).

2. Who is the document for?

- 2.1 This document has been prepared to help explain LA children's social care's application of thresholds to referrals made to its service. The document also sets out the circumstances in which LA children's social care are likely to provide services and, where the threshold for a service is not met, provide alternative options for the referrer (often through universal services).
- 2.2 This document is primarily targeted at professionals who are in regular / daily contact with children or families, and may have a concern about a child or young person. It also aims to support LA children's social care teams, particularly first contact (or equivalent) teams, in describing how thresholds are applied to referrals they receive and therefore promote greater consistency between local authorities.
- 2.3 This document is issued as guidance for local authorities who wish to use it, and is not considered compulsory.

3. Referral pathways and services

- 3.1 Referrals to services regarding concerns about a child typically fall into three categories:
 - Early intervention and prevention – Common Assessment Framework referrals
 - Child in need – Section 17 referrals
 - Child protection – Section 47 referrals
- 3.2 Section 17 and Section 47 referrals will be considered by LA children's social care, but early intervention and prevention referrals will often be made to other services and not processed up by the local authority (although LAs will usually hold a list of cases that have been subject to a CAF).
- 3.3 Safeguarding and child protection work should always be underpinned by principles of working in partnership with families. In all cases, consent must be sought from parents / carers to share information as appropriate, although there are certain circumstances in which this consent is not required (e.g. where there is specific risk of harm to a child and sharing the information with the parents would place the child at further risk).

- 3.4 The local authority has no mandate to compel parents to undertake assessments or accept services, although there may be consequences for the family if recommended services or interventions are not taken up by parents / carers.
- 3.5 Each local authority will have its own referral process for LA children's social care. Increasingly, the Common Assessment Framework is being used as a referral form, but this is not the case in all boroughs.

4. Common Assessment Framework (CAF)

- 4.1 The Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is a holistic assessment of a child's needs for services. It is a process for recognising signs that a child may have unmet needs that universal services cannot meet, and identifying and involving other agencies who may be able to support the child and/ or undertake specialist assessment. Central to its development is the principle that it is child/ young person centred, holistic and can be shared across professionals as appropriate. The term is also used to describe the format in which the assessment is recorded.
- 4.2 The CAF provides a common method of assessment across children's services and local areas. It facilitates early identification of needs, leading to co-ordinated provision of services, involving a lead professional where appropriate, and sharing information to avoid the duplication of assessments.
- 4.3 The common assessment is designed for when:
- There are concerns about how well a child is progressing in terms of their health, welfare, behaviour, progress in learning or any other aspect of their well-being;
 - The child's needs are unclear or broader than a single universal service can address.
- 4.4 A common assessment should be completed when a professional in any agency has concerns that a child will not progress towards the five Every Child Matters priority outcomes (being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being) without additional services.
- 4.5 The CAF Pre-Assessment Checklist is a quick form that reflects the 5 ECM Outcomes, designed to help practitioners identify and document an initial concern, and/or determine the level of the concern.
- 4.6 Completing a common assessment should:
- Enable the professional to identify the child's needs;
 - Provide a structure for systematic gathering and recording of information;
 - Record evidence of concerns and a baseline for measuring progress in addressing them;
 - Provide a framework for a discussion with LA children's social care regarding an initial or core assessment or to another service for a specialist assessment.
- 4.7 Completing a common assessment can also provide a standardised written referral proforma to support a telephone referral.
- 4.8 See Appendix A of this guidance, which provides a list of levels of need and their characteristics. It is important to note that this list is not exhaustive, but included for illustrative purposes only.
- 4.9 Where there is an immediate need to protect a child, professionals must contact LA children's social care and/or the police directly and make a referral, rather than completing a common assessment.

- 4.10 See *Mobility and Young London: Integrated working without boundaries (the London CAF protocol)* for more information about the operation of the CAF across London. The Protocol represents an agreement by local authorities and partners delivering children's services in London to set in place consistent standards of service for all children, young people and families with identified additional needs, where some responses may need to be accessed via services not in their authority of residence. It also addresses cases where services need to be provided across LA boundaries, and represents an agreement to work collaboratively, to compromise when required and to be flexible with regard to current strategies: ensuring that children and young people remain at the heart of any engagement, support and intervention.

5. Child in Need / Section 17

- 5.1 Section 17 of the Children Act 1989 places a general duty on every local authority to safeguard and promote the welfare of children who are need within their area. LA children's social care must, so far as is consistent with this duty, promote the upbringing of children in need by their families, through provision of a range and level of services appropriate to the child's needs.
- 5.2 The Children Act 1989 states that a child shall be considered "in need" if:
- S/he is unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining, a reasonable standard of health or development without the provision of services by a local authority;
 - Their health or development is likely to be significantly impaired, or further impaired, without the provision of such services; and/or
 - S/he is disabled.
- 5.3 Before referring a child to LA children's social care under section 17, professionals should ensure that a CAF has been completed (with a lead professional identified where appropriate), and that a referral has been made to the appropriate specialist services. A section 17 referral to LA children's social care should be made if these initial attempts to improve the situation have been unsuccessful, accompanied by evidence of the actions taken to date.

6. Child Protection / Section 47

- 6.1 Section 47 of the Children Act 1989 requires the local authority to make enquiries to enable it to decide whether action is required to safeguard and promote the well-being of the child. LA children's social care will carry out a core assessment as a means of conducting the Section 47 enquiries.
- 6.2 The purpose of the core assessment is to determine whether the child is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm and to assess whether action is required to safeguard and promote the child's welfare. Health, education and other services have a statutory duty to help LA children's social care to carry out the Section 47 enquiry. The local authority will work with the police in the case of a criminal investigation.

7. LA children's social care – duties and responsibilities

- 7.1 LA children's social care operates under a strict legal framework, and it is this legal framework that dictates which cases must be accepted from referral, and what services can be offered or provided to children, young people and families.
- 7.2 LA children's social care determines the level of need for children by a process of assessment based on the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families (2000). The assessment looks at the child's developmental needs, parenting capacity of their carers, and family and environmental factors.

- 7.3 LA children's social care uses thresholds to consider whether a referral will be accepted, whether an assessment will be undertaken, and what services will be offered or provided. This way, they can ensure that help is targeted at those children who are most vulnerable, and that any decisions made about services are consistent.
- 7.4 Once a referral is accepted, LA children's social care will carry out an assessment to identify the child's level of need and risk, and decide on an appropriate plan of action and services to be offered depending on this assessment.
- 7.5 When a referral is below their threshold, LA children's social care will provide referrers with information on more suitable resources and pass the referral to other services where appropriate. Referring professionals should seek reasons for decisions made by LA children's social care so that they are able to update their own files.

8. How to decide whether to make a referral

- 8.1 It is important to be clear about the purpose and intended outcome of the referral. Using the information in section 3 and the appendix, it is helpful to consider the three main categories of referrals, and related levels of need, to consider where your concerns about a child or young person fit.
- 8.2 It can be very useful to consult with other professionals in the child's network (such as health visitor, youth worker, teacher) if you have concerns. When the concern is around risk of harm to a child, you may want to speak to your own agency lead for child protection and safeguarding. Alternatively, you can speak with one of your local authority's child protection advisers or the duty social worker about a referral.
- 8.3 Professionals in all agencies have a responsibility to refer a child to LA children's social care when it is believed or suspected that the child:
- Has suffered significant harm; or
 - Is likely to suffer significant harm.

9. Local contacts

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Appendix A – The London Continuum of Need (CAF thresholds)

See *Integrated Working Without Boundaries – the London Common Assessment Framework (CAF) Protocol (Young London Matters, 2009) annex 2a: The London Continuum of Need (CAF thresholds)* for a set of risk and resilience triggers that may guide a local authority's response to referrals.

The London Continuum of Need model was developed in consultation with local authorities and key local, regional and national partners. It should be noted that some local authorities have more detailed level descriptors than are set out within this annex. The London Continuum does NOT provide an exhaustive list of all the possible scenarios and practitioners should always use their professional judgement.

The London Continuum of Need is available to download at

www.younglondonmatters.org/uploads/documents/mobilityandyounglondoncafprotocolannex2a.pdf