

Durham

Safeguarding Children Partnership



September 2025



**Guidance
document**

What is Cumulative Harm?

Cumulative harm is the way that harmful events or a pattern of harm build up to have an impact on the child/young person over time. Cumulative harm results from episodes or periods of abuse, neglect and other harmful or difficult circumstances that a child/young person sees, hears and experiences. It can include physical, sexual, emotional and psychological harm caused by a lack of care or by the behaviour of parents, carers, other adults, other children and young people or the child/young person themselves. Accidental harm and other traumas such as pandemics, natural disasters and living through war can also add to the harm a child suffers.

When considering harm to a child or young person over time, it is important that we consider any safety that reduces or mitigates the harm and the impact on the child/young person.

Safety can include times when parents, carers or someone from the wider network has stepped in to stop the harmful behaviour from happening in the first place, or from affecting the child/young person. This could include parents/carers choosing to behave in safer ways, or a member of the network stepping in to keep the child safe and meet their needs when harmful behaviour is happening around the child/young person.

Identifying cumulative harm

When a child/young person first becomes known to you, read the child/young person's record and contact other practitioners who know the child and family for any relevant information they hold. This is particularly important when a child and family has moved from another area, and we don't hold their history on our records.

Take time to understand the child/young person's history and develop a multi-agency chronology of the most important events in their life, both good and worrying.

Focus on the child/young person's whole childhood alongside the presenting issues.

Understand what life is like for them day to day and how any past experiences could still be affecting them currently.

Work directly with the child/young person to understand what is happening in their life from their perspective. Speak to the people who love and care about the child/young person (the family network) and the practitioners who know the child and family for their take on the situation.

The role of strengths and safety

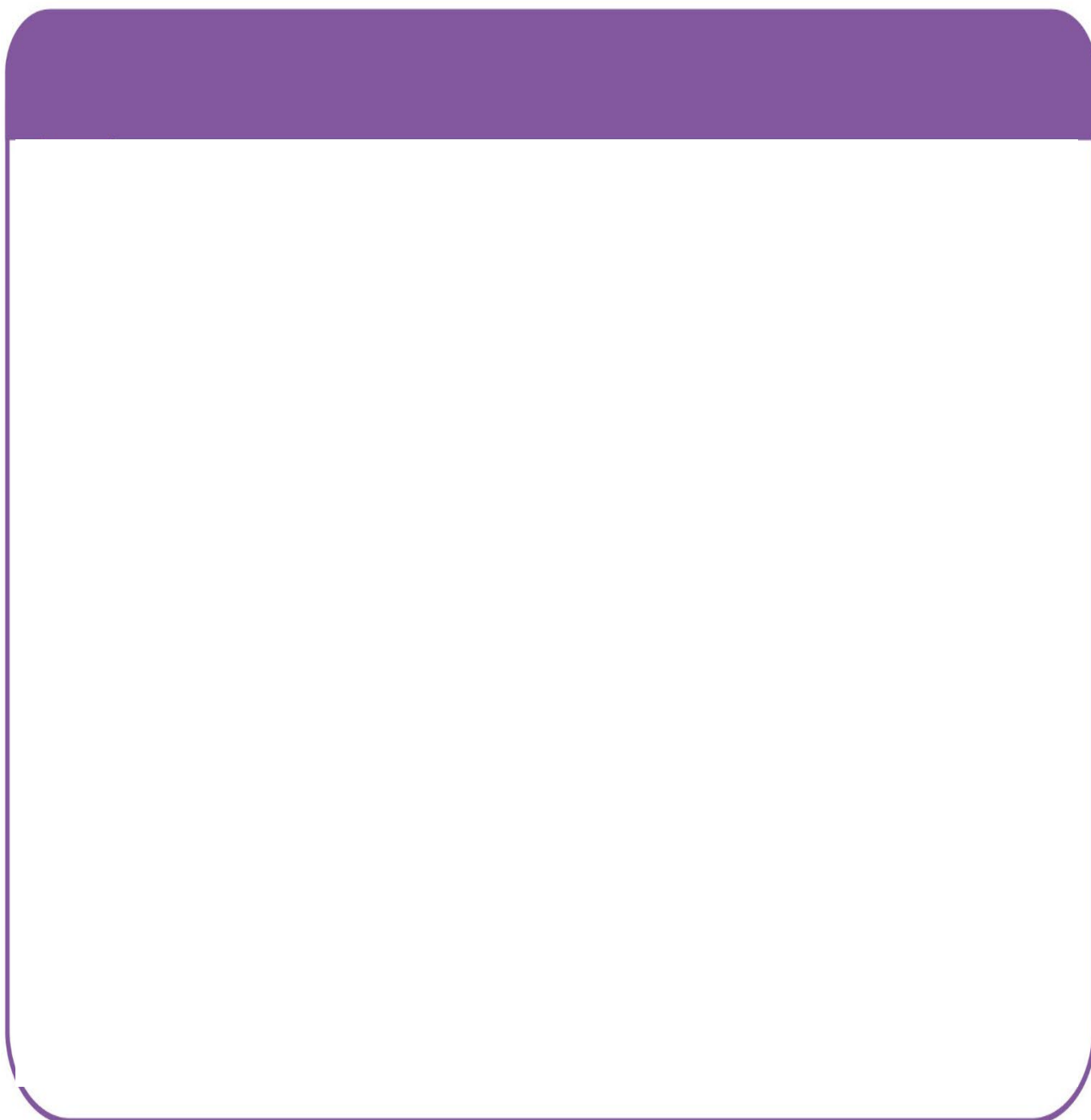
Impact of cumulative harm

What is the impact of the harm on the child/young person over time and how do we know? Be clear about when the child/young person is *at risk* of being harmed and when they have *been* harmed. Consider the seriousness of the harm based on the evidence, for example risk to life, risk to health, risk to wellbeing etc.

What is the child/young person telling us about the harm and how it has affected them? Remember, the child/young person does not need to tell us that something has happened for us to be worried about them. There may be times that they don't feel able to say anything, for example re sexual abuse or domestic abuse. What are people seeing in the child/young person's behaviour or presentation that is making them worried? *'If the behaviour could talk, what might it say?'*

Consider how we make sense of a child/young person's behaviour given their experiences. Think 'what has happened to this child?' rather than 'what is wrong with this child?' This is a shift from viewing the child/young person as the 'problem' or 'perpetrator' to someone who has suffered abuse or harm.

Consider what has happened in the past that is still having an impact on the child/young person today. This is the golden thread, and it can help us to understand how a child/young person is learning to cope with what has been happening, such as withdrawing, self-harm etc. Don't make assumptions. Remember that behaviour is communication.













Impact of strengths and safety

What can we do?



Useful resources

-  [Threshold Guidance](#)
-  [Multi-agency Chronology Guidance](#)
-  [Durham Harm/Worry Matrix](#)
-  [DASH Risk Assessment](#)
-  [Child Exploitation Risk Assessment.pdf](#)
-  [Multi-Agency HEAT Tool](#)
-  [Multi-agency HEAT Tool Guidance](#)
-  [Language that Cares Guidance](#)
-  [NSPCC Graded Care Profile 2](#)
-  [Voice of the Child and Lived Experience](#)