

London Borough of Barking and Dagenham Guidance for Single Assessment

Statutory assessments under the Children Act 1989

A child in need is defined under the Children Act 1989 as a child who is unlikely to achieve or maintain a satisfactory level of health or development, or their health and development will be significantly impaired, without the provision of services; or a child who is disabled. In these cases, assessments by a social worker are carried out under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. Children in need may be assessed under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, in relation to their special educational needs, disabilities, or as a carer, or because they have committed a crime. The process for assessment should also be used for children whose parents are in prison and for asylum seeking children. When assessing children in need and provision services, specialist assessments may be required and, where possible, should be coordinated so that the child and family experience a coherent process and a single plan of action.

Concerns about maltreatment may be the reason for a referral to local authority children's social care or concerns may arise during the course of providing services to the child and family. In these circumstances, local authority children's social care must initiate enquiries to find out what is happening to the child and whether protective action is required. Local authorities, with the help of other organisations as appropriate, also have a duty to make enquiries under section 47 of the Children Act 1989 if they have reasonable cause to suspect that a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, to enable them to decide whether they should take any action to safeguard and promote the child's welfare. There may be a need for immediate protection whilst the assessment is carried out.

Some children in need may require accommodation because there is no one who has parental responsibility for them, because they are lost or abandoned or because the person who has been caring for them is prevented from providing them with suitable accommodation or care. Under section 20 of the Children Act 1989, the local authority has a duty to accommodate such children in need in their area.

Following an application under section 31A, where a child is the subject of a care order, the local authority, as a corporate parent, must assess the child's needs and draw up a care plan which sets out the services which will be provided to meet the child's identified needs.

The purpose of assessment

1. Whatever legislation the child is assessed under, the purpose of the assessment is always:
 - To gather important information about a child and family;
 - To analyse their needs and/or the nature and level of any risk and harm being suffered by the child;
 - To decide whether the child is a child in need (section 17) and/or is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm (section 47); and
 - To provide support to address those needs to improve the child's outcomes to make them safe.
2. Assessment should be a dynamic process, which analyses and responds to the changing nature and level of need and/or risk faced by the child. A good assessment will monitor and record the impact of any services delivered to the child and family and review the help being delivered. Whilst services may be delivered to a parent or carer, the assessment should be focused on the needs of the child and on the impact any services are having on the child.
3. Good assessments support professionals to understand whether a child has needs relating to their care or a disability and/or is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm. The specific needs of disabled children and young carers should be given sufficient recognition and priority in the assessment process. Further guidance can be accessed at *Safeguarding Disabled Children – Practice Guidance (2009) and Recognised, valued and supported: Next steps for the Carers Strategy (2010)*.
4. Practitioners should be rigorous in assessing and monitoring children at risk of neglect to ensure they are adequately safeguarded over time. They should act decisively to protect the child by initiating care proceedings where existing interventions are insufficient.
5. Where a child becomes looked after the assessment will be the baseline for work with the family. Any needs which have been identified should be addressed before decisions are made about the child's return home. An assessment by a social worker is required before the child returns home under the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010. This will provide evidence of whether the necessary improvements have been made to ensure the child's safety when they return home.

The principles and parameters of a good assessment

6. High quality assessments:

- are child centred. Where there is a conflict of interest, decisions should be made in the child's best interests;
- are rooted in child development and informed by evidence;
- are focused on action and outcomes for children;
- are holistic in approach, addressing the child's needs within their family and wider community;
- ensure equality of opportunity;
- involve children and families;
- build on strengths as well as identifying difficulties;
- are integrated in approach;
- are a continuing process not an event;
- lead to action, including the provision and review of services; and
- are transparent and open to challenge.

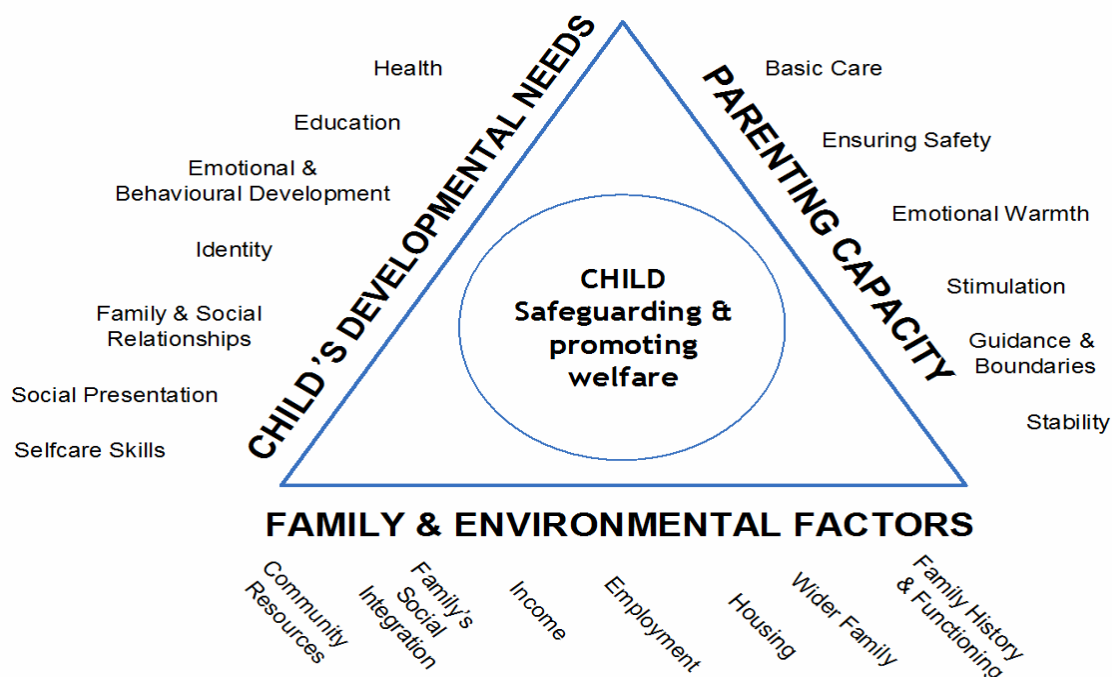
7. Research has shown that taking a systematic approach to enquiries using a conceptual model is the best way to deliver a comprehensive assessment for all children. A good assessment is one which investigates the following three domains, set out in the diagram on the next page:

- the child's developmental needs, including whether they are suffering or likely to suffer significant harm;
- parents' or carers' capacity to respond to those needs; and
- the impact and influence of wider family, community and environmental circumstances.

8. The interaction of these domains requires careful investigation during the assessment. The aim is to reach a judgement about the nature and level of needs and/or risks that the child may be facing within their family. It is important that:

- information is gathered and recorded systematically;
- information is checked and discussed with the child and their parents/carers where appropriate;
- differences in views about information are recorded; and
- the impact of what is happening to the child is clearly identified.

Assessment Framework



9. Assessments for some children – including young carers, children and special educational needs (who may require statements of SEN or Education Health and Care Plans subject to the passage of the Children and Families Bill), unborn children where there are concerns, asylum seeking children, children in hospital, disabled children, children with specific communication needs, children considered at risk of gang activity, children who are in the youth justice system – will require particular care. Where a child has other assessments it is important that these are coordinated so that the child does not become lost between the different agencies involved and their difference procedures.
10. Clarify how the statutory assessments will be informed by other specialist assessments, such as the assessment for children with special educational needs (Education, Health and Care Plan) and disabled children.

Focusing on the needs and views of the child

11. Every assessment should be child centred. Where there is a conflict between the needs of the child and their parents/carers, decisions should be made in the child's best interests.

12. Each child who has been referred into local authority children's social care should have an individual assessment to respond to their need and to understand the impact of any parental behaviour on them as an individual. Local authorities have to give due regard to a child's age and understanding when determining what (if any) services to provide under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, and before making decisions about action to be taken to protect individual children under section 47 of the Children Act 1989.
13. Every assessment must be informed by the views of the child as well as the family. Children should, wherever possible, be seen alone and local authority children's social care has a duty to ascertain the child's wishes and feelings regarding the provision of services to be delivered. It is important to understand the resilience of the individual child when planning appropriate services.
14. Every assessment should reflect the unique characteristics of the child within their family and community context. The Children Act 1989 promotes the view that all children and their parents should be considered as individuals and that family structures, culture, religion, ethnic origins and other characteristic should be respected.
15. Every assessment should draw together relevant information gathered from the child and their family and from relevant professionals including teachers, early years workers, health professionals, the police and adult social care. *The assessing Social worker must pay due regard to any joint protocols including and evidencing compliance with the YOS, Housing and Health and Social Care Pre Birth - Joint protocols.*
16. A high quality assessment is one in which evidence is built and revised throughout the process. A social worker may arrive at a judgement early in the case but this may need to be revised as the case progresses and further information comes to light. It is a characteristic of skilled practice that social workers revisit their assumptions in the light of new evidence and take action to review their decision in the best interests of the individual child.
17. The aim is to use all the information to identify difficulties and risk factors as well as developing a picture of strengths and protective factors.

Developing a clear analysis

18. The social worker should analyse all the information gathered from the enquiry stage of the assessment to decide the nature and level of the child's needs and the level of risk, if any, they may be facing. The social work manager should challenge the social worker's assumptions as part of this process. An informed decision should be taken on the nature of any action required and which services should be provided. Social workers, their managers and other professionals should be mindful of the requirement to understand the level of need and risk in a family from the child's perspective

and ensure action or commission services which will have maximum impact on the child's life.

19. No system can fully eliminate risk. Understanding risk involves judgement and balance. To manage risks, social workers and other professionals should make decisions with the best interests of the child in mind, informed by the evidence available and underpinned by knowledge of child development.
20. Critical reflection through supervision should strengthen the analysis in each assessment.
21. Social workers, their managers and other professionals should always consider the plan from the child's perspective. A desire to think the best of adults and to hope they can overcome their difficulties should not trump the need to rescue children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes. Social workers and managers should always reflect the latest research on the impact of neglect and abuse when analysing the level of need and risk faced by the child. This should be reflected in the case recording.
22. Assessment is a dynamic and continuous process which should build upon the history of every individual case, responding to the impact of any previous services and analysing what further action might be needed. Social workers should build on this with help from other professionals from the moment that a need is identified.
23. Decision points and review points involving the child and family and relevant professionals should be used to keep the assessment on track. This is to ensure that help is given in a timely and appropriate way and that the impact of this help is analysed and evaluated in terms of the improved outcomes and welfare of the child.

Focusing on outcomes

24. Every assessment should be focused on outcome, deciding which services and support to provide to deliver improved welfare for the child. *In determining the appropriate outcome the assessment must specifically address and respond to the stated wishes and feelings of the child and young person.*
25. Where the outcome of the assessment is continued local authority children's social care involvement, the social worker and their manager should agree a plan of action with other professionals and discuss this with the child and their family. The plan should set out what services are to be delivered, and what actions are to be undertaken by whom and for what purpose.
26. Many services provided will be for parents or carers. The plan should reflect this and set clear measurable outcomes for the child and expectations for the parents, with measurable, reviewable actions for them. *Where the plan reflects the need for social care involvement at Tier 4 reference to legal*

guidance and statute should be reflected in the analysis, recommendations and the plan.

27. The plan should be reviewed regularly to analyse whether sufficient progress has been made to meet the child's needs and on the level of risk faced by the child. This will be important for neglect cases where parents and carers can make small improvements. The test should be whether any improvements in adult behaviour are sufficient and sustained. Social workers and their managers should consider the need for further action and record their decisions. The review points should be agreed by the social worker with other professionals and with the child and family to continue evaluating the impact of any change on the welfare of the child.
28. Effective professional supervision can play a critical role in ensuring a clear focus on a child's welfare. Supervision should support professionals to reflect critically on the impact of their decisions on the child and their family. The social worker and their manager should review the plan for the child. Together they should ask whether the help given is leading to a significant positive change for the child and whether the pace of that change is appropriate for the child. Any professional working with vulnerable children should always have access to a manager to talk through their concerns and judgements affecting the welfare of the child. Assessment should remain an ongoing process, with the impact of services informing future decisions around action.

Timeliness

29. The maximum timeframe for the assessment to include, such that it is possible to reach a decision on next steps, should be no longer than 45 working days from the point of referral. If, in discussion with a child and their family and other professionals, an assessment exceeds 45 working days the social worker should record the reasons for exceeding the time limit.
30. Whatever the timescale for assessment, where particular needs are identified at any stage of the assessment, social workers should not wait until the assessment reaches a conclusion before commissioning services to support the child and their family. In some cases the needs of the child will mean that a quick assessment will be required.
31. The assessment of neglect cases can be difficult. Neglect can fluctuate both in level and duration. A child's welfare can, for example, improve following input from services or a change in circumstances and review, but then deteriorate once support is removed. Professionals should be wary of being too optimistic. Timely and decisive action is critical to ensure that children are not left in neglectful homes.
32. It is the responsibility of the social worker to make clear to children and families how the assessment will be carried out and when they can expect a decision on next steps.

Management Oversight

33. Your line manager will provide initial management direction on actions to commence your assessment and involvement with the child, the family and the professional network surrounding the family system.
34. Together managers and Social workers will ensure
 - a) Visits are conducted to the child within 7 working days from allocation as a maximum and within 24 hours if the assessment is conducted under s.47 1989 Children Act.
 - b) Risks to the child are identified and measures to implement interim safety plans – are immediate and recorded.
 - c) The purpose of the assessment defined along with a record of the discussion with the referrer and or CAIU as appropriate.
 - d) Assessment tools determined

You will be required to report to your manager at least twice again during the assessment process; the timescale will be informed by the presenting concerns and your initial findings but the first review of the assessment should be conducted at 9 days and the second no later than the 35th day.

Your line manager has three working days to respond to your completed single assessment. Your assessment may be authorised, or your manager may have further questions about your findings; in this event you will need to address these queries, and/or any gaps in your assessment, within two working days, following which your assessment must be re-sent to your line manager for review and authorisation.

The authorising manager will be guided by the attached – Authorisation of assessment tool – see appendix 1.

Managers will ensure

- a) That children have been seen and that age appropriate direct work has been undertaken to record their experiences
- b) If children have not been seen the manager will set out a clear rationale and management decision as to why this was not possible or appropriate
- c) That all children in the household have been considered and as appropriate risk to children associated with the household have been considered
- d) That the Social worker understands the family history and completed a chronology
- e) Risks analysed and clear recommendations recorded and agreed with the appropriate officers and key stakeholders
- f) Plans reflect the risks to be addressed and the child's wishes and feelings as appropriate duly considered.

NRPF assessments with longer term resource implications must be agreed by the respective GM. The assessments will not be endorsed without recorded evidence of the following

- a) Financial assessment form completed
- b) The needs of the children presented to NRPF surgery
- c) NRPF – Home Office Connect Database checked

Sharing your assessment with the family

- e) Your assessment must be shared with the subject family within five working days following authorisation. If the outcome of the assessment is that no further action is required to support the family and/or reduce risk, then the assessment can be posted to the parent/s with parental responsibility via recorded delivery, and a covering letter which allows ten working days for any response. If the assessment requires further statutory intervention or targeted family support, the assessment must be shared in person.
- f) Where the needs of the children have been determined as appropriate for Targeted Family Support the 'Targeted Family Support Plan Template' must be completed and sent to the BSO to initiate the step down/ closure process. The template requires the referring Social worker to clearly state that the plan has been discussed with the parents and where appropriate the child or young person and consent has been provided to share the outcome of the assessment and relevant details.