



South Eastern Health
and Social Care Trust

Statement of Purpose

Child Protection/Safeguarding Service

1. What we do

Child Protection/Safeguarding is part of the South Eastern HSC Trust's Children's Services which provides services to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of children, young people and their families. We assess the needs of children and their carers to ensure allocation of appropriate services to support parents in their parenting role.

We do this by offering help, advice, support or information to:-

- Parents who are having difficulties which impact on their ability to meet their children's needs
- Children whose health and welfare may be at risk if they do not receive support
- Children and young people (including unborn babies) who are at risk of being neglected or harmed
- Children with disabilities and their families
- People who would like to provide a home for a child through fostering or adoption
- Children and young people in trouble with the law
- Children who require an alternative placement to the family home
- Children in need of day care provision. We regulate childminders, playgroups, nurseries, crèches and after school facilities in keeping with legislation, policy and procedures.

2. How Children's Services offers general help, advice or support

Staff at Children's Services understand that being a parent isn't always easy, and that it is sometimes hard to cope when things get on top of you. We also believe that children have a right to live in a safe and happy environment, to be respected for who they are and to be given opportunities to achieve their full potential. We know that some families need a bit of extra help and support with this, and we want to work with parents, carers, children and young people to achieve the best possible outcome for each child or young person.

Some services such as health visiting are made available to ALL families. Families with children or young people under the age of 18 (or 21 with a disability) who live within the geographical area covered by the Trust may receive help, advice, support or information from Children's Services .

When supporting children and families Children's Services work in partnership with many professionals from within and outside our organisation including the voluntary sector. This helps us to assess need more accurately and provide a broader range of support services. These services may be provided by Children's Services or by other agencies.

We also provide very specific services to those families and children who are assessed as being in greatest need.

You may contact Children's Services in relation to a wide range of help, advice and support which is delivered locally on a geographical basis.

Tel: 0300 100 0300

You will then be connected with the office which delivers the service for your area.

3. *How we provide a Child Protection/ Safeguarding Service*

3.1 How do children come to be harmed?

Very few adults harm children deliberately and most often when harm does happen, families need support. Staff from the Child Protection/ Safeguarding Services will get involved when they believe that physical injury, neglect, sexual or emotional abuse has occurred or is likely to happen.

If you are worried about your own or someone else's care of a child, seek advice about what practical and emotional support is available. This helps to ensure that families are offered support before the situation becomes worse. Services can be accessed via the Gateway Teams based at the above office bases between 9.00am – 5.00pm Monday – Friday with the exception of public holidays. Thereafter the out-of-hours duty services should be accessed immediately if an emergency response is required on (028) 9056 5444.

3.2 The Principles underpinning our work

Our strategies, policies, procedures and services to safeguard children are based on the following :-

The Area Child Protection Committees' Regional Policy and Procedures.

The Children (NI) Order 1995 and the Principles, outlined in ***“Co-operating to Safeguard Children” (DHSSPS 2003)*** which are:-

- The child's welfare must be paramount and this overrides all other considerations
- A proper balance must be struck between protecting children and respecting the rights and needs of parents and families; but where there is a conflict, the child's interests are paramount

- Children have the right to be heard, to be listened to and to be taken seriously. Taking account of their age and understanding they should be consulted and involved in all matters and decisions which may affect their lives
- Parents/carers have a right to respect and should be consulted and involved in matters which concern their families
- Children and families have equal access to services across the region
- Actions taken to protect a child, including investigation, should not cause the child unnecessary distress or add to any damage already suffered
- Intervention should not deal with the child in isolation; the child must be considered in a family setting, with the impact of concerns also informing an assessment of the needs of other children within the family
- Where it is necessary to protect the child from abuse, alternatives should be explored which do not involve moving the child and which minimise the disruption of the family
- Actions taken by agencies must be considered and well informed so that they are sensitive to and take account of the child's age, gender, stage of development, physical and mental disability, religion, culture, language, race and, in relation to adolescents, sexual orientation
- All agencies concerned with the protection of children must work together on an inter-agency basis in the best interests of children and their families
- Each agency must have an understanding of each other's professional values and accept their respective roles, powers and responsibilities.

3.3 Our Responsibilities

The primary responsibility for safeguarding children rests with their parents, who should ensure that children are safe from danger in the home and free from risk from others. Some parents cannot always ensure this degree of safety and it may be necessary for statutory agencies to intervene to ensure that the child is adequately protected. The South Eastern Health and Social Services Trust is such an agency and we have a statutory duty to investigate all allegations that a child or young person may be at risk and ensure their safety. If there are serious concerns about a child's safety, making sure that the child is safe is always our first concern.

The Child Protection / Safeguarding Service has the lead responsibility for making sure that children are safe, but this involves working with a range of other professionals, such as schoolteachers other educational staff, police, and other health staff such as GPs or health visitors. We rely on information from parents, family, and the local community, who all play an important part in identifying concerns about those who are close to them. We encourage any member of the public who thinks that a child is at risk to let us know. We aim to work directly with the parents/carers of any children who may need protection from harm, to ensure the children are safe. Sometimes a range of professionals may need to be more closely involved when parents/carers are unable to make sure that their children are safe.

3.4 Referral and Assessment

When we are contacted by family members, a member of the public or a member of a statutory or voluntary agency regarding a child protection concern, we regard this as a referral. When a referral is made, staff in our Gateway Teams will carry out an initial assessment. They will ask certain questions about the situation then make a decision whether we need to take further action.

If we think there is a need to take further action following the initial assessment we may ask one of our specialist teams to carry out a more detailed assessment. The assessment is the way we work out which children and families we should provide services for. This means that a Social Worker will visit, talk and sometimes ask questions to work out what help a family might need, what supports or strengths they have already, and how best to arrange any support that may be required.

3.5 We have strict child protection policies and procedures

All professionals in the South Eastern Health and Social Services Trust involved with children must follow regional child protection policies and procedures when they have serious concern about a child's welfare and believe he/she may need to be protected.

These procedures are written and approved by the Area Child Protection Committee which is a group of senior professional people who represent all the agencies which need to work in partnership with parents/carers and young people to make sure that families and children are given the best possible help when children need to be protected.

The child protection policies and procedures provide instructions to all professionals about what they should do if they are seriously concerned about a child's welfare.

3.6 What action will be taken about children who may be at risk of abuse or neglect?

Child abuse is not necessarily easy to recognise, prevent or stop. It can be difficult to say definitely whether a child has been abused or by whom. A careful assessment is needed in order to find out what has happened and what support and protection will best help the family. As a result it can be difficult to avoid some intrusion into family life. A social worker will ask questions about the family

circumstances, consider the frequency and the seriousness of the concern(s) and the effect on the child. All of these factors will help to decide what should happen to support and protect the child and their family.

Sometimes a specially trained Social Worker and a specially trained Police Officer will meet with the family when abuse is reported. They may also talk with other professionals in order to make decisions about how to help. We have a duty under The Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995 to investigate concerns of child abuse. This means we have no choice and have to act on the reports we receive.

Reporting child abuse rarely results in the child being removed from home. This is not the main aim of child protection investigations and rarely happens. Social Workers can only remove children from home with parental consent or with a court order, having demonstrated that there is serious and immediate risk.

3.7 Why does an enquiry start?

If the Child Protection/ Safeguarding Service are told by anyone that a child or young person is at risk of abuse, neglect or actually experiencing significant harm, the law states that we must make a child protection enquiry. This includes:

- Parents, children and their families
- Relatives, friends, neighbours
- Professionals who work with children such as teachers, doctors, nurses and health visitors.

Anyone wishing to report possible abuse should contact either the Police or the nearest Child Protection/ Safeguarding Service Office. Outside of normal office hours contact the Emergency Duty Team on (028) 9056 4444.

3.8 Why have a child protection enquiry?

Some people find these enquiries upsetting, but they are the only way to find out whether a child does need protection or services. We realise that enquiries like these make parents anxious and staff will carry out their job in as sensitive a way as possible. Sometimes an enquiry shows that there are no reasons to worry or that a family simply needs some advice or support from a professional agency. Occasionally our enquiries show that there are serious problems.

In every case the staff carrying out the enquiries try to be fair to everyone and as open as possible about what they do and why. Staff will always give priority to the needs of the child.

3.9 How is an enquiry carried out?

The main aim when an enquiry is begun is to decide whether a child is suffering or is likely to suffer 'significant harm'. Significant harm is defined in the ***Children Order (NI) 1995*** as “ill treatment or the impairment of health or development” compared with what would be reasonably be expected of a similar child. A social worker will talk to the person who has said they are worried and contact other professionals who may already know the child and ask them for any background information they may have. In some cases the Police will investigate with Social Workers to help protect children and decide whether an offence has been committed. They will visit parents at home to explain what the concerns are and to find out what are the views of the parents/carers. They will ask to see the child and any other children living in the home, and they may want to see the general living conditions within the home and see where the child is sleeping. If it seems necessary, they may ask you to take your child or children to a doctor for a medical examination.

Professionals know that they must treat as strictly confidential anything they are told. In a few of the most serious situations, which involve a child who is old enough to co-operate, we may wish to record a video interview so that there is a very clear record of what they say. This can be used as evidence in court. We would normally take these steps only when a parent or someone else with parental responsibility has given permission and the child/young person is in agreement to be interviewed.

We try to be as open as possible about our enquiries, but our main concern is to do what is best for the child.

3.10 What happens if someone does not want to co-operate?

During child protection enquiries the Child Protection/ Safeguarding Service will do its best to make sure that it is safe for a child to stay at home. We prefer to have family co-operation and can be more confident about leaving a child at home when families are working with us to sort out any problems. In a small number of cases where the risk to a child is very serious it may not be possible to keep the family together. We may agree that friends, relatives or one of our approved foster carers should temporarily look after the child. A member of the family who is thought to present a risk to the child may be asked to move out to temporary accommodation whilst matters are sorted out. Should an adult member of the household refuse to leave the home when requested we may be left with no option but to apply to the court for an order to temporarily remove the child to ensure the child's safety.

3.11 What happens when an enquiry concludes?

If we believe that a child is not at risk we will let the family know and explain why we took the action we did. We may suggest support services that might help the family. If the enquiry concludes that a child is or may be suffering significant harm we will arrange what we call a 'Child Protection case conference'.

4. A Child Protection Case Conference

(Note:- *There is a series of more detailed leaflets available from the Trust on this matter- one each for parents, young people and professional staff*)

4.1 What is a child protection conference?

The child protection case conference is one part of the procedures required by the Area Child Protection Committee.

A child protection case conference is a meeting that may be called after the Child Protection/ Safeguarding Service have assessed and looked into particular concerns related to the care of a child. It brings together the family and professionals who work with the parents and children to share information and make decisions about what is needed to keep the child or children safe and promote their welfare.

4.2 Who will be at the child protection case conference?

A number of professional people will be at the child protection case conference. These people will normally be those that you or your child have contact with, e.g. health visitor, GP, school teacher, probation officer, social worker. Others attending include a police officer from the public protection units, school nurse, child protection nurse specialist, a social work team manager, a chair person for the meeting and a secretary to take minutes. Other specialists may attend if their participation is deemed relevant.

4.3 Partnership with Parents/Carers - their views are very important.

If you have parental responsibility we know that you have a vital part to play in helping the professionals reach a decision, and in the South Eastern Trust all people with parental responsibility are invited to come to the case conference.

You will be able to hear the professional workers' concerns and views, ask questions and give your own account of matters which led to the case conference.

You may worry that you will be criticised and want to hold back information, but experience shows that where parents have contributed at child protection conferences better decisions are reached with regard to agreeing an action plan to address the concerns identified and collectively we can work towards better outcomes for children.

If it helps you can bring someone with you to help you say what you want to and to support you. This could be a relative, a friend, a solicitor or someone you trust. They are in attendance to support you but not to represent you.

If you would like to write down your views or write a report for the case conference the social worker will be pleased to help you with this and have it typed for you.

If your first language is not English or if you have difficulty with reading, speaking or understanding English please do let your social worker know so that he/she can make sure plenty of time is available so that the reports can be read to you and/or a signer or interpreter can be present to help you at the conference.

It is preferable that babies and young children do not attend a case conference. If you need help in making arrangements for younger children so that you can attend please discuss with your social worker.

4.4 Young peoples' views are important

Young people who are being discussed at a child protection case conference may also be invited to come for part or all of the meeting to give them the chance to share their views of the situation. Young people will be allowed to share their views without their parents being there if this helps them.

Generally we expect that young people of about 12 years and over may be able to understand and deal with the case conference situation but this will clearly vary from individual to individual so the age of 12 years is only intended as a guide.

Young people will also be supported by the social worker to put their views in writing should they wish to have them taken into consideration by the conference.

4.5 Will you know what the professionals think before the meeting?

All of the professionals who know you are expected to provide a written report /or contribute to a composite report coordinated by the social worker for the case conference. The social worker and health visitor will show you their report and discuss it with you before the meeting.

Other agencies are also encouraged to share and discuss their reports with you before the case conference happens so that you don't see the reports for the first time in the actual meeting. This will help you feel more prepared for the meeting and will keep you fully involved and aware of the professionals concerns and opinions.

It is the social worker's responsibility to explain what will happen at the case conference and help you to attend; although other professionals will also be able to help if you choose, e.g. health visitor, teacher.

4.6 What happens at the child protection case conference?

The reason for holding the case conference is to share all the information relevant to the assessment of your child and family, to discuss everybody's view including yours and the child/young person who is the subject of the meeting and decide whether there is continuing concern for their safety or wellbeing.

The case conference will be chaired by an experienced Social Work manager. He or she will meet with you prior to the meeting to explain the process and answer any questions you may wish to clarify. They will introduce you to all in attendance at the meeting, make sure the meeting is run properly and that everyone has the chance to say what they wish in relation to your family's needs.

At the beginning of the meeting the professionals who know you and your child will give out their written reports. You will be able to share your written report too if you wish. Everybody then reads the reports.

Normally all the information at case conferences is shared with parents. However, occasionally there will be information from people who are not professionals that cannot be shared or information held by professionals that for very exceptional reasons cannot be shared (for eg. PSNI if a criminal investigation is underway). In this situation the chairperson will tell you that there is some confidential information and you will be asked to leave for a very short time whilst this is given.

After the reports have been read each professional will be given the chance to highlight information in their report. Once they have done this the chairperson will ask you if you would like to comment about anything people have said or written. Then you have the chance to ask questions of people at the meeting. You should tell the chair person your questions if you have any and he or she will then put them to the meeting.

The chairperson will then ask the meeting what questions they would like to ask you. The chairperson will decide which questions are alright to be asked and may decide that some questions should not be asked. Usually the questions that will be asked will be about anything that remains unclear from what has already been said, for example, questions about what you wish for the future and about what help you may want from professionals at the meeting.

The next stage of the conference is the decision making stage. Although you will be present throughout this discussion, the decisions will be made by the professionals involved.

If the decision is made to place your child's name on the child protection register, another conference will be held within three months to decide whether at that point it is still necessary for the child names to be included on the child protection register. You will be asked to attend this meeting. After this case conferences will be held every six months for as long as the child stays on the register.

4.7 What decisions can the child protection case conference make?

If the case conference believe there is continuing risk of significant harm for the child in your family, they must say what the concern is, i.e. whether it fits into the definitions laid down by the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for deciding that child are at risk of abuse or neglect. ***(Co-operating to Protect Children, DHSSPS 2003)***

If it is decided by the child protection case conference that your child are at risk of abuse or neglect their names will be placed on Child Protection Register. A decision in respect of child protection registration is the only actual decision that the child protection case conference can make.

The child protection case conference may also make recommendations to the professional agencies about whether it is necessary to take any legal advice to protect your child.

The case conference will also want to recommend a plan, to make sure that each professional agency can work with you to help you protect your child and help you with any difficulty you may have. This is called a child protection plan.

4.8 What if you don't come to the conference?

We recognise that it can be very difficult for parents to come to a meeting like this, you don't have to come and it won't count against you if you don't. You should, however, be aware that another person cannot attend in your place.

If you can't come then your social worker will tell the case conference about your views of the situation and discuss the decisions and recommendations with you.

Whether or not you attend the case conference the chairperson will send you a letter telling you whether or not your child's names was placed on the child protection register and for what reason. Notes of the case conference (minutes) will be sent to you within 14 days.

5. After the Child Protection Case Conference

5.1 The Child Protection Register

The Child Protection Register is a list which includes the names of all children that a child protection conference has decided are at continuing risk of significant harm in the form of potential/suspected/confirmed physical/ sexual/ emotional abuse or neglect and need a child protection plan to be put in place to help protect them in the future.

The Child Protection Register is confidential and only professional people involved with your child and family will know that your child's name is on the child protection register.

5.2 Will 'they' take your child away?

Professionals working with children always prefer to keep families together if possible, even in situations where they are worried that children are at some risk. The vast majority of such children stay at home with the aid of professional help. This would usually include regular visits from a social worker.

However, we have to put the safety and wellbeing of your child first and if those at the child protection case conference consider that he or she would be at serious risk at home then it could be recommended that your child should be cared for by someone else.

Sometimes you might be in agreement with this, but sometimes it may be better to go to court to get a legally binding decision. If this happens you will be able to put your point of view to the court.

Your social worker will always explain all that is happening and why. He or she will also encourage you to seek legal advice.

Case conferences have no power to remove your child against your wishes. A magistrate or court must decide this.

5.3 How will your child's name be removed from the child protection register?

If your child's name is placed on the child protection register a follow up child protection case conference will be held within three months and thereafter every six months while the child remains on the Child Protection Register. However it may be brought forward if the child protection plan is not effective or a new concern has come to light. You will be advised what needs to be achieved to ensure your child's safety so that you can work towards achieving this.

If this case conference is satisfied that there is no longer a need for a child protection plan then your child's name will be removed from the child protection register.

5.4 Is there anything I can do if I am not happy with the case conference?

We know that attending case conferences can often be a difficult and stressful experience and all staff will do their best to try to make the meeting as comfortable for you as possible. However, if you feel that you are unhappy about the way that the case conference was run or feel that the decision made was the wrong one you can ask to speak to either the social worker, the chair of the meeting, or their managers to appeal the decision or to make a complaint.

Children and young people, parents, people with parental responsibility and carers of the child can make a complaint if they believe that the case conference did not follow the above format, or if they believe that the decision made was the wrong one. First of all we will try our best to sort out the problem as quickly as we can, between yourself and the chair of the meeting. This is called the informal stage. If we are unable to sort out the complaint informally then you can ask to progress to the formal stage where an independent person will be appointed to investigate your concerns.

If you have concerns about the process or the outcomes of the case conference you may make an appeal. This may concern the fact of registration or the category of registration. It may also concern the decision not to register the child or to de-register the child. If you make an appeal in relation to the decision of the case conference and that appeal is not upheld and you are still dissatisfied you may then contact the office of the Ombudsman. Your social worker can give you details regarding the appeal procedure.

If you have complaints about any other matters, then, you should speak to the person concerned or ask to see their manager. All agencies have their own complaints procedures which would need to be followed when complaints do not relate to the case conference process.

6. *How will people be treated by the professionals they meet?*

Our staff will keep an open mind and act in a professional manner. We will be fair to all the family and other people involved. All concerns will be explained fully as well as any decisions made. Records will be made and peoples' views noted. All important decisions will be confirmed in writing. We will only share confidential information with other professionals who need to know. We shall always be sensitive to any religious or cultural beliefs within the family and provide an interpreter if this is needed.

If staff fail to meet these standards, people have the right to complain about the Child Protection/ Safeguarding Service . The complaints procedure should be used if we failed to do something that had been promised, or if anyone felt that they had not been treated fairly.

At the point of entry to the safeguarding/child protection service, a copy of the comments/complaints leaflet will be given to you and explained to you by the field social worker.

7. *Care for children and young people who cannot live at home*

There are a number of reasons why children and young people may not be able to live at home with their families. Some will be at risk of neglect or abuse, but others will be in that situation because of family breakdown, illness or other family difficulties. Some children may need to be looked after only for a short period, while others will need long-term care. When this happens we try to find somewhere else safe for the child to live; usually it can be with extended family or with foster carers, but it could also be in a children's home.

8. *Adoption / Family Adoption / Fostering / Kinship Care*

Adoption is a legal and permanent way of providing a family for children. Fostering is a temporary arrangement, lasting anything from a few days to many years, where a child is cared for by another family. Although this family makes decisions about the day-to-day care of the child they do not have legal parental responsibility for the child.

Those interested in adopting a child or providing kinship/ foster care have to go through an extended assessment process before being approved as adopters or foster carers.

There are several different forms of foster care available, and people who are interested in becoming foster carers can choose to offer the type of foster care which suits them best. We need foster carers for both long and short term placements, and also foster carers who can offer emergency care at short notice.

Friends or relatives who agree to look after a child need to have an assessment and can become registered as foster carers for a specific child, depending on the outcome of the assessment.

You can contact the **Adoption Team** at:

Lisburn (028) 9260 7528

Bangor (028) 9127 0672

You can contact the **Fostering Team** at:

Lisburn (028) 9260 7528

Bangor (028) 9127 0672

Downpatrick (028) 4461 3511

9. How we handle your personal information

When you are in touch with Children's Services, we will keep information about you in written records and computer files. We will keep this information confidential, except where we need to share it with people providing you with care, or to protect other people.

You have a right to ask to see records we keep about you.

If you would like more information about how we handle personal information ask us for information.

10. Complaints, Comments and Compliments

We welcome any comments about our services - good or bad. We are interested to hear how we could do things better, and we like to know when we are doing well.

If you are unhappy with the services you receive, we encourage you to make a complaint. Full details are given in our leaflet Comments, Compliments or Complaints, available from any of our offices.

This information can also be provided in alternative formats such as large print, audio, in Braille, or electronically.

11. *Where can I get more information on children's services or pass on my concern if I think a child may be at risk?*

If there is suspected ill treatment of a child or young person, contact the Gateway Team and you'll be put through to a Duty Social Worker.

All offices are open Monday to Friday 9.00am to 5.00pm excluding Public and Bank Holidays.

You may contact Children's Services in relation to a wide range of help, advice and support by telephoning:-

Tel: 0300 100 0300

If an urgent response is required outside of office hours telephone the Emergency Duty Team on (028) 9056 5444 or contact the police on 999 if there is an emergency.

12. *Who else might provide help and information?*

Here are some local organisations, national helplines and web sites which provide advice and support for parents and young people.

ChildLine

Tel: 0800 1111

www.childline.org.uk

NSPCC

Tel 0808 800 5000

www.nspcc.org.uk

Parent Advice Centre

Tel 0808 8010 722

www.parentsadvicecentre.org.uk

Barnardos

Tel 0800 085 2704

www.barnardos.org.uk

Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People

Tel 028 9031 1616

www.allchildrenni.gov.uk

