

BNSSG Continuum of Need: Support Framework for Children & Families

The right help in the right way at
the right time



June 2026



PLEASE NOTE: This guidance has been updated in line with the requirements of the Families First Partnership Programme Guide and includes elements of working practice that are still being developed across Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire. Our fully operational Multi Agency Child Protection teams across the region will not be completely in place until March 2027 and this document will be updated throughout this period to reflect the ongoing changes

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BNSSG Threshold & Support Framework for Children and Families

The Right help in the Right Way at the Right Time

This guidance is for everyone working with unborn babies, children and families from pre-birth to 18, and up to 25 where the young person has Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) across Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire (BNSSG).

The term 'children' is used throughout this document to refer to anyone under the age of 18. Whilst we recognise this may not be the language children would use, this is to remind us, as professionals, of their legal status as children and our statutory responsibilities to them.

Statutory Context: Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026 says:

Safeguarding partners should publish a threshold document, which sets out the local criteria for action in a way that is transparent, evidence-based, accessible, and easily understood.

This should include:

- The process for accessing universal services and community-based early help, which may include an assessment.
- The criteria, including the level of need, for when a child should be referred to Family Help.

Further information about the threshold document can be accessed in [Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026](#).

1) Purpose

This guidance provides a **regional continuum of need and response** so that children receive **the right help, in the right way, at the right time**, with fluid movement between levels as needs change. This guidance supports shared

understanding and decision making; it does not replace professional judgement or create barriers to acting where there are concerns about a child¹.

We know that early intervention and prevention is the most effective way of enabling children to reach their full potential and/or protecting children from harm. This includes access to information, advice or help before problems occur or escalate. For this to work it requires everyone to have a shared responsibility for keeping children safe and to work together effectively.

Everyone who works with children and families across BNSSG² has an important contribution to make to ensure they do the best they can for the children and families they work with and for linking them to the right level of help and support.

All of us need to ensure children receive the right help at the right time and in the right way.

2) Principles for Everyone

1. **Child-centred, whole-family:** Decisions place the child's welfare first, hear their voice, and consider the family and community context.
2. **Early, proportionate help:** Identify and address needs as soon as they emerge to prevent escalation.
3. **Multi-agency responsibility and accountability:** Universal and targeted services remain involved alongside specialist/statutory services for a whole-system response.
4. **Strengths-based, trauma-responsive and outcome focussed:** Build on family strengths (e.g., Signs of Safety), minimise re-telling, and promote participation of parents/carers.
5. **Timely Information sharing:** Share relevant information promptly with transparency and lawfully to safeguard children. [Information Sharing Guidance](#)
6. **Professional judgement and clear thresholds:** Use clear indicators of need and local tools to structure assessment and decisions, empowering and supporting practitioner judgement.

¹ This guidance should be read alongside Working Together to Safeguard Children 2026, the Children Act 1989 (including Sections 17 and 47), the Children Act 2004, the Equality Act 2010, the SEND Code of Practice and local safeguarding partnership procedures.

² Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire

7. **Inclusive Practice:** Work inclusively at all times, recognising and responding to the impact of protected characteristics, culture, identity and lived experience. Practitioners should consider how intersecting factors may influence a child or family's experiences and access to support, and take steps to reduce inequality, discrimination and disproportionality in outcomes.

Continuum of Need

Universal

Definition: Needs met by universal services (e.g., health visiting, primary care, schools, early years) with no additional targeted input required.

Children generally enjoy happy, healthy and secure childhoods. They and their families can access the opportunities, information, advice or help they need from universal settings and services such as maternity services, health visitors, GPs, family hubs, early years settings, schools, colleges, youth services and others.

Family Help

Family Help and multi-agency child protection reforms are wholly interdependent. Together, they will enable children and families to access help earlier and receive coordinated support that responds to their needs before difficulties escalate. At the same time, these reforms will ensure that specialist child protection expertise remains focused on children who require protection from significant harm. Multi-agency Child Protection Teams will work in partnership with Family Help Lead Practitioners, offering consultation, support, and challenge throughout child protection processes.

Targeted Support including Child in Need (Section 17)

Definition: Emerging or single-issue needs that cannot be met by universal services alone requiring coordinated **Family Help**.

We know that at some point in all our lives, we need extra help. That need might arise from a personal experience, from trauma or loss, or from the pressures of the wider world, the cost of living, or community tensions. For some children, more help is needed, either because of their own additional

needs or because of other difficult circumstances that impact on them and/or their families. There are a small number of children who will need extra help to be healthy and safe and to achieve their potential.

Family Help brings together targeted early help, child in need support and safeguarding services into a seamless offer. While families may move between targeted early help and child in need within Family Help, this should feel seamless with minimal disruption – supported by greater consistency in lead practitioner, and the use of single assessments and plans, helping families retain relationships and trust in the system.

- targeted early help: children and families with multiple and/or complex needs that require a plan to be in place and a lead practitioner appointed; and
- children in need (Section 17, Children Act 1989): a general duty for local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need or are disabled, and promote the upbringing of such children by their families by providing a range and level of services appropriate to those children's needs.

Family Help should be led by Family Help lead practitioners (FHLPs) who will be a range of practitioners from professional backgrounds with the right knowledge and skills to support families who need help. Some will be social work qualified, and others will have alternative appropriate skills or qualifications. Decision-making in relation to the right FHLP to work with a family will be informed by existing relationships.

Specialist Help

Definition: Children who require statutory intervention, including where there is reasonable cause to suspect significant harm.

There are concerns that a child cannot be kept safe without statutory involvement. Children's Social Care leads assessment, planning and intervention, working with partners to protect the child and promote their welfare.

Whatever level families are being supported at, practice remains proportionate, respectful and child centred, with the aim of increasing safety and enabling safe step-down to targeted or family help support where possible.

4) Decision-Making & Pathways

4.1 How to seek help

All three areas in BNSSG have a referral or request for help process:

- [Bristol referral process](#)
- [North Somerset process](#)
- [South Gloucestershire process](#)

Further information about each local area is available in Appendices 2-4

4.2 Effective Information Sharing

No single practitioner can have complete understanding of a child's needs and circumstances so effective sharing of information between practitioners, organisations and agencies is essential for early identification of need, assessment, informed decision making and service provision to keep children safe.

- It is important to work alongside and to keep families and children informed when we are working with them. It is important that they know what information is being shared about them and with who. There are times when we can share information without consent to keep a child safe. You can find further information about working with consent [here](#)
- Practitioners should be proactive in sharing information as early as possible to help identify, assess, and respond to risks or concerns about the safety and welfare of children. This may be when problems are first emerging (for example, persistent school absences, going missing, or receiving unexplained gifts or new possessions) or where a child is already known to local authority children's social care or the police.
- Across the Avon & Somerset Police footprint there is a Tier One Information Sharing Agreement. A link will be added here as soon as the Tier One is published.

4.3 Families First Partnership (FFP)

Multi Agency Child Protection Teams (MACPT)

A strong and decisive child protection system is one where multi-agency practitioners have the expertise, authority, time and support to identify and

respond decisively to actual or likely significant harm – whether it occurs inside and outside the home, and online.

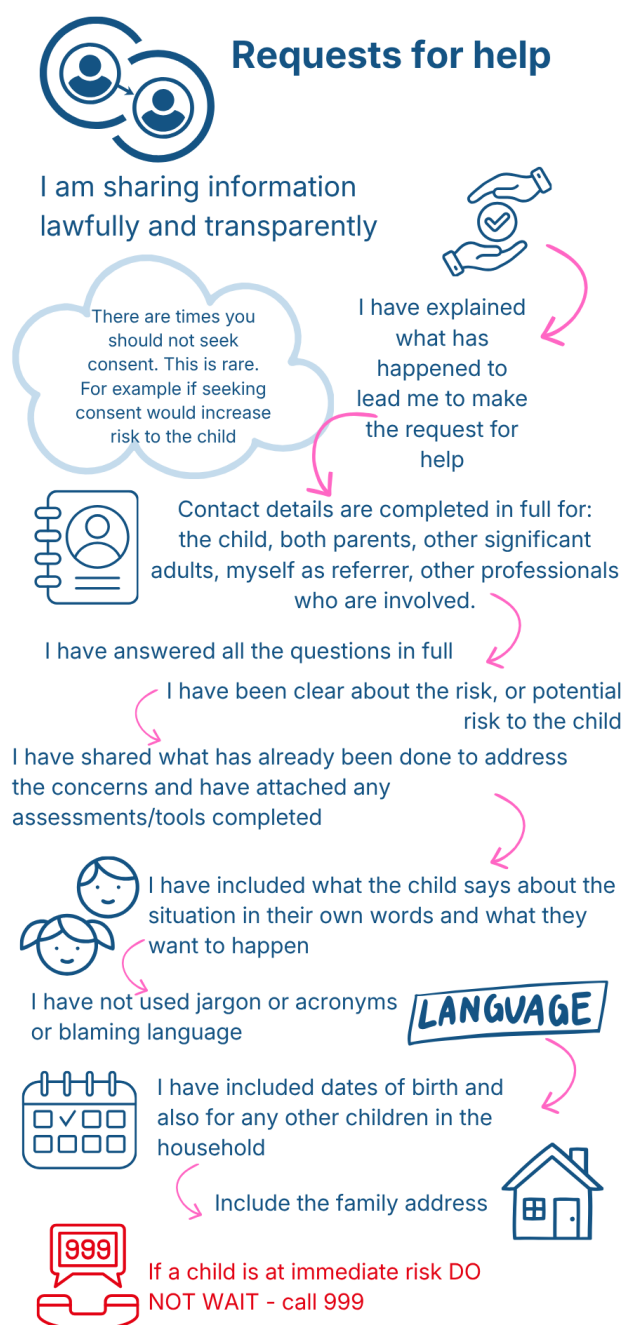
Through multi-agency child protection teams (MACPTs), children, families and the wider Family Help system will benefit from skilled practitioners who understand, and robustly and consistently apply, the significant harm threshold. These teams will bring together, at a minimum, embedded Lead Child Protection Practitioner (LCPP) social workers and appropriately senior police, health and education professionals - will make timely and informed and multi-agency judgements about whether the significant harm threshold is met. This will focus rapid protective action on the children who need it. Multi-agency child protection teams will act as centres of local excellence, guiding practice across agencies to support the timely identification of significant harm and maximising opportunities to protect children, advising and guiding the wider system on concerns about child protection. They will respond to child protection concerns about children of all ages and in all contexts, from unborn children to teenagers, and children in family homes to children in or leaving care.

Family group decision-making (FGDM)

Family group decision-making (FGDM) is an umbrella term for voluntary, family-led decision-making forums. These forums ensure a child's wider family network can be meaningfully supported by practitioners to develop a plan in response to concerns about a child's safety and wellbeing. Practitioners should routinely consider how FGDM can be used to empower family networks to practically support parents and carers, keeping the child's safety and wellbeing at the centre of decision making.

The purpose of the meeting is to create a plan for the child, centred around keeping them safe, by addressing the concerns of the local authority and family

5) Making a Request for Help



Whichever local authority you are working in, when you request help be sure to consider the following:

- talk to the child/family
- explain fully what has happened
- complete full contact details of all involved, include any siblings
- answer all the questions in full
- be clear about the risk to the child
- explain what has already been tried, what's working, what's not
- include the child's voice
- use language that cares

6) Escalation & Resolution of Professional Differences

Constructive professional challenge is important. If there is disagreement about risk, threshold or the plan, please follow your **local escalation policy**.

- [Bristol Policy is here](#)
- [North Somerset Policy is here](#)

- [South Gloucestershire Policy is here](#)

Cross-border children should be discussed without delay between local authorities manager-to-manager with agreed timescales and a clear record of decisions.

7) Development, Quality & Review

Each partnership provides a range of multi-agency safeguarding training which you can access on the links below:

- [Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership Training](#)
- [North Somerset Safeguarding Children's Partnership Training](#)
- [South Gloucestershire Children's Partnership Training](#)

Multi-agency audits are regularly completed to identify learning and good practice, and this includes quality of referrals and response to children and families. Our audits test how well our thresholds are applied in practice.

Learning from audits is available here:

- [Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership learning](#)
- [North Somerset Safeguarding Children's Partnership learning](#)
- [South Gloucestershire Children's Partnership learning](#)

Appendix One – Example levels of need table

Universal	Examples of need	What might help
<p>Most children and their families will have access to the opportunities they need to thrive within universal settings. This includes education and health settings and in communities such as parks, libraries, and leisure facilities</p>	<p>Physically well, up to date with immunisations, regular health & dental care</p>	<p>Family and child access available universal services. Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Midwifery/Health Visiting/GP • School Nursing • Optician/Dentist • Health centre/walk in/hospitals • Early Years settings • School or college • Libraries, leisure centres • Social clubs/groups • Childcare • Support from family/friends • Citizens Advice/DWP • Housing services • Police • Children’s Centres
	<p>Stable family environment where parents/carers meet the child’s needs. Family stresses are managed appropriately</p>	
	<p>Age-appropriate skills & milestones</p>	
	<p>Access to educational provision, meeting milestones, no barriers to learning</p>	
	<p>Sufficient income and housing to meet family’s needs, integrated within community</p>	
	<p>Parents provide secure and consistent care</p>	
	<p>Secure attachments and positive sense of self</p>	
	<p>Consistent and appropriate boundaries are set and maintained</p>	

Family Help	Examples of Need	What might help
<p>Family Help brings together targeted early help and child in need support and safeguarding services into a seamless offer.</p>	<p>Minor health needs, some missed appointments. Developmental milestones not reached. Over or underweight. Concerns re: diet or hygiene.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health specialists • Children’s centres • Housing support • Mentoring services • Debt services • Counselling • Targeted parenting programmes • Youth sector provision • Homelessness prevention • NEET targeted courses • Behaviour support • Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services
	<p>Poor attendance/ punctuality / engagement at EY setting, school or college</p>	
	<p>Relationship difficulties beginning to affect child, experiencing bullying</p>	
	<p>Difficulties in relationships with family/peers. Child</p>	

	receives little positive stimulation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School Health Nursing Service • Community paediatrics • Domestic abuse services • Drug and alcohol services • Police • Respite care • Refugee/resettlement services
	Disruptive/challenging behaviour and/or low self-esteem. Child frequently criticised.	
	Gaps in learning, not making expected progress	
	Poor accommodation, low income, socially isolated	
	Parents struggling to meet child's need without support; food, warmth and other basic requirements not available due to family circumstances	
	Domestic abuse	
	Parental substance misuse and/or mental health needs	
	Risk of exploitation – associating with others who are involved in anti-social or criminal behaviour. Friendships inappropriate for age.	
	Experience of trauma. Child is a young carer.	
	Disabled child with additional care needs and requiring some support for the family	

Specialist	Examples of Need	What might help
Children who require statutory intervention, including where there is reasonable cause to suspect significant harm	Child suffering or at risk of suffering significant harm including physical, sexual, emotional and neglect. Including perplexing presentations (fabricated illness)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children's Social Care • Youth Justice Service • Child & Adolescent mental Health Services • Community paediatrics • Police • Accident and Emergency service
	Endangers own life through self-harm, eating disorder	

	Suspected non – accidental/ unexplained injury	
	Pre-birth assessment indicates significant harm.	
	Children who cause serious harm to others.	
	Children who are remanded to custody.	
	Complex mental health needing specialist intervention	
	Risk/Harm outside the home – child exposed to exploitation. Forced marriage.	
	Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking child	
	Parent unable to provide adequate and safe parenting. Continual instability or domestic abuse in the home.	
	Child/Parent relationship at risk of breakdown. Vulnerable children left alone/unsupervised.	

Practitioners working in Bristol should also refer to [Effective Support for Children and Families](#) and [Indicators of Need](#) documents

Appendix Two: North Somerset

Report a concern	Care Connect care.connect@n-somerset.gov.uk Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm	01275 888 808
Make a request for help	Request for Support Form Consent and information sharing Effective Support for Children, Young People, and Families 2026	
Out of Hours	Out of hours emergency duty team	01454 615 165
Our processes and teams	<p>All contacts for children and families in North Somerset are processed through our Integrated Front Door. The contact is triaged by a manager or senior social worker and RAG rated.</p> <p>RED – Urgent action and strategy required – 4 hours – 24 hours.</p> <p>AMBER – Social Work assessment required – progressed in 24 hours. MASH checks requested if the level of need is not clear.</p> <p>GREEN – Early Help – Family Wellbeing hub for intensive Family support or other early help preventative services. Advice, guidance and signposting offered.</p> <p>MASH partners sit within the Front Door. Information is requested from our partners when the level of need is not clear and additional information is required to make the right decision for the children and young people we work with.</p> <p>Once the contact is progressed and a decision made for any actions any further actions will be explored by our</p>	

	Family Support and Safeguarding teams or our Family Wellbeing service.	
Harm/Risk Outside the Home	The Safer Me Tool is an initial screening tool designed to help practitioners recognise risk from outside a child or young person's home. Any practitioner can fill in this tool if they have concerns that there is a risk of exploitation, or they have noticed some potential indicators. A multi-agency triage process will then inform the child's pathway through the Front Door or will prompt a reanalysis if existing support is in place.	
Escalation	Issue Resolution Policy	
Resources (leaflets/website/etc)	Childrens Safeguarding Partnership	
Adults	North Somerset Safeguarding Adults Board	

Appendix Three: Bristol

<p>Report a concern</p>	<p>Concerns about a child Call First Response: 0117 9036444 If the child is at immediate risk call the Police on 999</p>
<p>Make a request for help</p>	<p>Concerns about a child Call First Response: 0117 9036444 If the child is at immediate risk call the Police on 999</p>
<p>Out of Hours</p>	<p>Emergency Duty Team: 01454 615615 If the child is at immediate risk call the Police on 999</p>
<p>Our processes and teams as of June 2026. NB: This will change as National Families First reforms take effect.</p>	<p>Bristol Children’s front door is called First Response.</p> <p>We have 4 levels of intervention in Bristol. Level 1 is support provided to all children and families through universal services. Level 2 is additional support that can be provided by single agency referrals or through our Family Hubs. Level 3 is intensive support which can be provided by our Family help service. Level 4 is specialist and often involves high level intervention, including safeguarding. Full details found here: (link to local threshold doc)</p> <p>Family hubs can be contacted directly for support Bristol Family Hubs.</p> <p>Professionals wishing to make a request for help (Level 3 – Targeted Support) on behalf of the family should speak to the family to gain consent and then complete a webform referral - Make a request for targeted support</p> <p>All safeguarding referrals should be made by contacting First Response via Telephone. Members of the public can also make a referral for Targeted Support via telephone.</p> <p><u>What Happens when I call?</u></p> <p>A Deputy Team Manager or First Response advisor will receive your call. They will ask for basic details of the family and for you to share the concerns that you have, including what has been tried already with the family and what support you believe is needed. All safeguarding referrals are usually triaged within 1 working day, however children that we are the most worried about, who require urgent strategies should be progressed in 4 hours.</p>

	<p>MASH</p> <p>The Bristol Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) is a multi-agency group of professionals whose aim is provide an effective and rapid response to new safeguarding children concerns. To make an informed decision the team will gather and share information from partner agencies, children, young people and their families to decide who is best placed to respond to the concerns. The MASH is hybrid, but primarily based at Bristol’s City Hall, within the First Response service, who receive the initial enquiries. The MASH operates on a hub and spoke model where information is securely, swiftly, and legally shared across partner agencies to determine the next steps. First Response continue to take all referrals in the usual way, where they consider that information to make a threshold decision is needed by more than one professional, these may be funnelled through the MASH.</p>
Harm/Risk Outside the Home	Safer Connections Bristol
Escalation	KBSP Escalation of Professional Disagreements - Safeguarding Children
Resources (leaflets/website/etc)	Welcome to the Keeping Bristol Safe Partnership website. Concerns about a child
Adults	KBSP

Appendix Four: South Gloucestershire

Report a concern	accessandresponse@southglos.gov.uk	01454 866000
Make a request for help	Access the request for help form here Use this form to request support from all Local Authority Services. If you have an immediate concern call 01454 866000	
Out of Hours		01454 615165
<p>Our processes and teams June 2026</p> <p>These will change as the Families First programme embeds and teams will change. This section will be updated once this happens</p>	<p>Compass The Compass team is the ‘engine room’ for Early Help – it has been established to help families, agencies and settings navigate to the right information and help, at the right time and in the right way. Compass also provides advice, help, guidance and training in relation to the Early Help Assessment and Plan/ Team Around the Family processes. The Early Help Assessment and Plan form is available here.</p> <p>Preventative Services Preventative services are targeted services providing help and support for families with children from pre-birth to 18 who need help to overcome significant difficulties that could lead to their children not thriving or, potentially, experiencing harm</p> <p>What Happens when I call? The first point of contact for referrals to Children's Social Care is the Assessment and Response Team (ART). The referral goes first to the Access Team, who will make an initial BRAG rating decision about what should happen next. This takes the form of:</p> <p>Blue This should be progressed in 5 days and will largely be requests for information.</p> <p>Red These are the children that we are the most worried about, these would be urgent strategies and should be progressed in 4 hours.</p> <p>Amber These are children who it appears have complex needs which likely require a social work response. This could be a non-urgent</p>	

	<p>strategy or a CIN assessment and should be progressed in 1 working day.</p> <p>Green These are children who it appears have needs which could be met by universal or early help services, these should be progressed in 3 working days.</p> <p>MASH MASH The South Gloucestershire Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) is a multi-agency group of professionals whose aim is provide an effective and rapid response to new safeguarding children concerns. To make an informed decision the team will gather and share information from partner agencies, children, young people and their families to decide who is best placed to respond to the concerns. The MASH is based at the South Gloucestershire Council Offices, within the Access and Response Team hub (ART), who receive the initial enquiries. The MASH operates on a hub and spoke model where information is securely, swiftly, and legally shared across partner agencies to determine the next steps. The Access Team continue to take all referrals in the usual way, where they consider that information to make a threshold decision is needed by more than one professional, these will be funnelled through the MASH.</p>	
Harm/Risk Outside the Home	Details of our processes for ROTH are here	
Escalation	Resolution of Professional Differences	
Resources (leaflets/website/etc)	Children’s Partnership Website	
Adults	South Gloucestershire Safeguarding Adults Board	