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**Local Protocol for Assessment and Support under Section 17 of the Children Act**

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**Contents**

[1. Context for this protocol and glossary of terms 4](#_Toc191284772)

[2. Effective Support for Children and Families in Bristol 4](#_Toc191284773)

[3. Assessment and Support 4](#_Toc191284774)

[Section 17 Assessments 4](#_Toc191284775)

[4. Child in Need (FH) Key Workers – Skills and Experience 5](#_Toc191284776)

[5. Referrals and Allocation 6](#_Toc191284777)

[6. Assessments, Planning and Intervention 7](#_Toc191284778)

[7. Escalation of Need 7](#_Toc191284779)

[8. Decrease of Need 8](#_Toc191284780)

[9. Quality Assurance and Governance 8](#_Toc191284781)

[10. Compliments and Complaints 9](#_Toc191284782)

# Context for this protocol and glossary of terms

Working Together 2023 requires that ‘Local authorities, with their safeguarding partners and any relevant agencies, should develop, agree and publish local protocols for assessments and support’.[[1]](#footnote-2)

This protocol sets out who can act as a lead practitioner in supporting children and their families under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 and sets out the governance arrangements to support effective decision making.

In this document, the ‘child’ refers to all children who are subject of the assessment. A ‘child’ is defined as anyone who has not reached their 18th birthday, including unborn children.

‘Team Manager’ refers to Consultant Social Workers, team managers / deputy team managers and senior managers who are social work qualified.

‘Social Worker’ is a protected title and when used within this document refers solely to people employed as Social Workers by Bristol City Council, who are both fully qualified and registered as a Social Worker with Social Work England.

# Effective Support for Children and Families in Bristol

In Bristol we believe that working together to provide flexible and responsive support at the earliest possible time and at the lowest appropriate level of intervention is key to supporting Children, Young People and their families to achieve their potential and to prevent reliance on reactive specialist services.

Further information about how organisations, agencies and practitioners undertaking assessments and providing services can work together in partnership to reach the best outcomes for the child and their family is included in our “Effective Support for Children and Families in Bristol” document. [Effective Support for Children and Families in Bristol and Indicators of Need](https://bristolsafeguarding.org/professional-resources/effective-support-for-children-and-families-in-bristol)

# Assessment and Support

## Section 17 Assessments

Under the Children Act 1989, local authorities are under a general duty to provide services for children in need for the purposes of safeguarding and promoting their welfare. A child in need is defined under section 17 of the Children Act 1989 as a child who is unlikely to achieve or maintain a reasonable level of health or development, or whose health and development is likely to be significantly or further impaired without the provision of services, or a child who is disabled.

In Bristol, the lead practitioner role for section 17 assessments, planning and support may be undertaken by

1. A Social Worker
2. An alternatively qualified or experienced Child in Need Family Help (FH) Key Worker with significant practice experience with children and families, under the direct supervision of a Team Manager

# Child in Need (FH) Key Workers – Skills and Experience

The Child in Need (FH) Key Worker role was introduced in Bristol following the clarification in Working Together 2023 of who can act as lead professionals for assessments under section 17 of the Children Act 1989. Child in Need (FH) Key Workers are alternatively qualified staff who have significant practice experience with children and families. This will be from related fields such as family support work, youth justice services, education, substance misuse or policing. They take lead professional responsibility for the social care assessment, plan and delivery of services to children and their families, managed closely by a Team Manager.

Alongside holding high practice experience entry requirements to these posts, the local authority will offer a bespoke training package to all Child in Need (FH) Key Workers to ensure that we have the highest level of confidence in the workers’ skill to undertake assessments, planning and intervention in line with our practice framework.

This will include a four-week induction to cover essential training at the point of entry to these posts, complemented by a range of shadowing and observation opportunities, to include activities such as home visits undertaken by qualified social workers, multi-agency meetings and case mappings in team meetings.

This initial training will cover the following topics:

* Introduction to UK law and legislation
* Introduction to Systemic Practice
* Introduction to Signs of Safety
* Case recording
* Working with parental substance misuse
* Assessment and analysis
* Introduction to direct work with children and young people
* Planning and reviews
* Child Development
* Working Together

Following the initial four-week induction period, Child in Need (FH) Key Workers will access a rolling programme of continuing professional development to be completed as needed within their first 12 months in post. This will include the following topics:

• Graded Care Profile 2 (Neglect)

• Domestic Abuse and Safeguarding

• Motivational Interviewing

• Working with fathers and father-figures

• Network Building

• Infant Care

• Extra-Familial Harm

# Referrals and Allocation

On receipt of a referral from Bristol First Assessment Service (First Response), within one working day a Team Manager will decide next steps and the type of response required. This decision will be made in line with local guidance (Effective Support for Children and Families in Bristol), legislation (Children Act 1989) and statutory guidance (Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023).

On a decision being made that the child should be assessed under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, the receiving Team Manager will be responsible for deciding whether the child should be allocated to a Social Worker or a Child in Need (FH) Key Worker, to complete the assessment.

This decision will be made based on the following considerations:

* The relevant skills and experience of the practitioners
* What the child and family are likely to need from an allocated lead professional and who is best placed to meet this need
* Any evident or possible risk to the child that could lead to a section 47 response being required at a later point

This decision will be supported by a team mapping, which will collaboratively explore the strengths, needs and next steps for the family prior to allocation. This mapping will inform the assessment, providing a plan for the assessing worker of key points for exploration and ideas of how we might best engage the family in the assessment.

Bristol operates under a relationship-based practice model, with services structured to minimise handover points and changes of worker for young people. As such, all possible efforts will be made at the point of allocation to provide a worker for the family who can remain alongside them across the lifespan of the intervention.

# Assessments, Planning and Intervention

On allocation of the child to a Social Worker or Child in Need (FH) Key Worker, the Team Manager will add a casenote to the child’s record directing the focus of the assessment, timescale for seeing the child and timescale for assessment completion, along with any further management direction relating to the undertaking of the assessment.

The lead professional will undertake the assessment in line with the management direction and the Bristol Practice Framework.

The small social care unit structure in Bristol means that all practitioners benefit from close and consistent contact with their Team Manager on a daily basis. Practitioners will consult with and update their Team Manager across the course of their assessment, both informally and in regular (monthly) supervision as defined by Bristol’s Supervision Policy. Supervision records relating to the child will be recorded on the child’s record as a case direction casenote and is therefore subject to review and quality assurance.

The Team Manager reviews the assessment and plan throughout the assessment period and will agree plans before work with the family commences. Progress against the plan will be reviewed in at least monthly supervisions.  The Team Manager can request further information, clarification or improvement of the assessment or plan if required. The Team Manager retains overarching responsibility for the quality of assessments and plans carried out by both Social Workers and Child in Need (FH) Key Workers.

All section 17 interventions are carried out in line with Working Together 2023 statutory guidance; Children Act 1989 legislation, the Bristol Practice Framework and local protocol. This includes compliance with all timescales and processes set within guidance (Working Together 2023). All practitioners undertaking statutory assessments are equally bound by this guidance and Team Managers are responsible for assuring this and upholding the highest practice standards.

Bristol is a Signs of Safety authority with our interventions rooted in Systemic and Relationship based practice. Our Principles, Approach and Methodologies are explained in full within our Bristol Practice Framework: [Bristol Practice Framework](https://bristolcouncil.sharepoint.com/sites/ChildrensServices/Shared%20Documents/Bristol%20Practice%20Framework_Childrens%20services.pdf?CID=5ec4e475-9871-48e2-8255-643148910d4a)

# Escalation of Need

Should there be a change in our understanding of risk to the child (for example, requiring a section 47 safeguarding response), the family can be seamlessly handed over to a Social Worker within the small unit. All strategy discussions are undertaken by a Team Manager and all assessments and any resulting plans are overseen and approved by a Team Manager and are made in line with Working Together 2023 guidance.

In situations where continuity of relationship is likely to be of benefit to the child (for example, if the Child in Need (FH) Key Worker has been successful in developing a trusting relationship with an exploited child), the small unit model supports and enables the continuation of that relationship, with capacity for the Child in Need (FH) Key Worker to co-work, under the case co-ordinator.

Families may also be “stepped in” to a social work unit for statutory services from our locality based early help teams. Arrangements are in place between Children’s Social Care and Families in Focus via weekly Locality Meetings to facilitate a consistent “step-in” of child in need or safeguarding support for families currently working with our level 3 Early Help services. Decisions about level of need and allocations to a Social Worker or alternatively qualified worker will always be taken by a Team Manager.

# Decrease of Need

At any point when the child and their family are no longer in requirement of statutory services, the Child in Need (FH) Key Worker or allocated Social Worker can close or step-down the child to level 2 or 3 services in the Indicators of Need tables (via the locality meetings described above). Step down processes are described within our Effective Support for Children and Families in Bristol document and defined by the need tables. Any decision to close or step-down a child’s case will be made only with full oversight and agreement by the Team Manager, who must sign off the closure record for the child. The aim of statutory intervention is always to reach a point of safety where the level of support can “step-down” or close.

Families will always be informed by their lead worker of any proposed change in service and the reasons for this, unless to do so would place the child at risk of harm.

# Quality Assurance and Governance

The delivery of high quality services to Children and Families in Bristol is the priority of the partnership. We will be assured of the impact of our Child in Need work, undertaken by both Child in Need (FH) Key Workers and Social Workers in the following ways:

* Collaborative case file audits are undertaken by each Team Manager on a 6 weekly basis.
* Team Managers hold overall responsibility for ensuring that the service that provided to children and their families in their service area is of a consistently high quality which positively impacts on good outcomes for children and their families. When improvements are identified for a practitioner, the Team Manager will be responsible for delivering these in a timely way for the child.
* Team Managers further hold the responsibility of delivering high quality supervision to practitioners within their unit. Professional development will be supported through workload management to ensure that staff are able to attend regular training, and through goal setting within both supervision and the appraisal process.
* Team Managers are responsible for all significant case management decisions (referral outcomes; allocations; plan sign off; closure) and must ensure that all interventions are completed in line with local protocol, national guidance and legislation.
* Bristol City Council is committed to extending our Quality Assurance activity to the senior management team and Thematic Auditing, Safeguarding Assurance Visits and Practice Week activities are undertaken regularly (at least bi-monthly as defined by the Quality Assurance Framework). Child in Need work is reviewed as standard within this activity, and we will further ensure that targeted quality assurance work is undertaken that is focussed upon Child in Need interventions and outcomes led by our Child in Need (FH) Key Workers over the initial two years of the posts.
* Supervision File audit is a standing thematic audit which will provide assurance as to the Team Manager’s oversight of the Child in Need (FH) Key Worker’s delivery of child in need interventions.
* We welcome partner engagement and involvement in our Quality Assurance Process and will invite key safeguarding partners to be involved in our quality assurance relating to our child in need assessment activity.
* In the initial two years from the inception of the Child in Need (FH) Key Worker roles, information will be presented to the Partnership’s Keeping Children Safe Board twice yearly, focussing on the impact of these roles and our quality assurance work.
* The Partnership agrees on an annual basis a Quality Assessment Framework for children and young people, detailing all our Quality Assurance activity including how we ensure that progress and learning has occurred following audits. Updates on the Quality Assurance Framework are included in the Partnership’s published Annual Report, found on the KBSP website.

# Compliments and Complaints

Bristol social care practitioners work alongside children, families, carers and other professionals in order to promote the best possible outcomes for the children. This means communicating, engaging, involving and acting on views appropriately. We ask for feedback as part of practice and quality assurance activity, as it is one of the best ways to understand how well this has been done and where it could be better. Gathering and using feedback promotes reflective practice and provides evidence of the good work taking place, and will be regularly discussed within supervision.

We also use information from compliments and complaints to inform practice development. Complaints are responded to swiftly to try and put things right as soon as possible. This will include hearing about what the complainer would like to happen as a result of their complaint. A complaint about Children’s Services will not have a negative effect on any services being provided.

Compliments or complaints can be made by:

* Having a conversation with your child’s worker or manager
* Completing an online form [Children's social work services: complaints and feedback](https://www.bristol.gov.uk/contact/complaints-and-feedback/children-and-young-people/childrens-social-work-services)
* Visiting our Citizen Service Point at 100 Temple Street, Bristol BS1 6AG (Monday – Friday 9am – 5pm)
* Writing to Customer Relations (100 TS), PO Box 3399, Bristol BS1 9NE
* Phoning 0117 9222723 (Monday – Friday 10am – 4pm)

1. Working Together to Safeguard Children 2023 paragraph 141 [page 53] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)