

STRATEGY DISCUSSION THRESHOLD CONSULTATION

A 5–15 MINUTE CHILD-CENTRED FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGERS

The question is always:

“What is happening in this child's lived experience that suggests they may be suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm – and why does this require a multi-agency child protection response now?”

PURPOSE

To help determine if the threshold for a Strategy Discussion under Section 47 Children Act 1989 may be met, and what decision best protects the child.

1 THE CHILD'S LIVED EXPERIENCE

What is life currently like for this child?

2 MINS



- Tell me about the child before you tell me about the incident.
- What is this child currently living with day-to-day?
- What has been directly observed about the child's presentation, behaviour, emotional wellbeing, functioning, development, or relationships?
- What worries us specifically about this child's lived experience?
- What has changed recently for the child?
- What does the child appear to be communicating?
- What would the child say is happening if they felt fully safe to speak honestly?
- What is the impact on this specific child?



FINAL DECISION QUESTIONS

- ✓ Does the information provide reasonable cause to suspect significant harm?
- ✓ What is the specific harm or likelihood of harm?
- ✓ What evidence supports that conclusion?
- ✓ What evidence challenges it?
- ✓ Is escalation proportionate?
- ✓ What is the most proportionate next step?

2 EVIDENCE AND HARM ANALYSIS

What do we actually know?

3 MINS



- What has been directly observed?
- What has been reported?
- What has been inferred?
- What evidence suggests the child may be suffering or likely to suffer significant harm?
- What evidence supports that concern?
- What evidence challenges or weakens that concern?
- Is this harm, risk, unmet need, danger, or unresolved concern?
- Are we seeing an isolated incident, cumulative harm, escalation, chronic neglect, emotional harm, coercive control, or instability?
- What remains unknown or untested?

A. STRATEGY DISCUSSION IS THE MOST PROPORTIONATE NEXT STEP



Why?

- What makes this a child protection concern requiring multi-agency investigation and information sharing?
- What will a Strategy Discussion allow us to do that we cannot do through current plans?
- What is the immediate risk if we do not escalate?

B. CONTINUE WITH EXISTING PLAN



Why?

- What evidence supports that the child is safe enough for this to remain the most appropriate response?
- What will tell us this plan is working or not working?

ACTIONS TO UNDERTAKE:

- What actions will you take?
- What will you monitor?
- What information is needed and by when?
- When will this be reviewed?
- How will you ensure the child's voice continues to shape the plan?

3 FAMILY FUNCTIONING AND PARENTAL CAPACITY

Can the adults recognise and respond to the child's needs consistently?

2 MINS



- What evidence exists that the adults understand the worries from the child's perspective?
- What happens for the child when professionals are not present?
- Is parental engagement translating into meaningful improvement for the child?
- Is there evidence of minimisation, disguised compliance, hostility, avoidance, blame-shifting, or inability to sustain change?
- Are domestic abuse, substance misuse, mental ill-health, trauma, instability, or contextual stressors affecting parenting capacity?
- Is the child adapting to the adults, rather than the adults adapting to the child's needs?

4 THRESHOLD AND ESCALATION ANALYSIS

Why does this require escalation now?

3 MINS



- Why now?
- What has changed that requires escalation at this point?
- Has the risk increased, intensified, repeated, become more visible, or become harder to interrupt?
- Why is single-agency intervention no longer sufficient?
- What would happen if we did not escalate today?
- Has drift occurred?
- Have previous interventions failed to improve the child's lived experience?
- Are we responding to objective child protection concerns, or professional anxiety?
- What specifically requires multi-agency safeguarding coordination?



RAPID MANAGER SUMMARY TEMPLATE (30–60 SECOND THRESHOLD FORMULATION)

The concerns relate to _____.

The child is currently experiencing _____.

Evidence supporting this includes _____.

The trajectory appears _____.

Current intervention is/is not sufficient because _____.

Therefore, I believe the threshold for a Strategy Discussion is/is not met because _____.

5 DECISION, RATIONALE AND NEXT STEPS

What decision best protects the child proportionately?

2–5 MINS



- Does the information provide reasonable cause to suspect significant harm?
- What is the specific harm or likelihood of harm?
- What evidence supports that conclusion?
- What evidence challenges it?
- Is escalation proportionate?
- What immediate safeguarding action is required?
- What is the most proportionate now?



CONSULTATION TIPS

DO

- ✓ Start with the child
- ✓ Separate evidence from interpretation
- ✓ Test assumptions
- ✓ Analyse impact
- ✓ Challenge drift
- ✓ Explore trajectory
- ✓ Remain curious
- ✓ Be proportionate

DON'T

- ✗ Use vague language like 'concerns remain'
- ✗ Confuse parental engagement with safety
- ✗ Escalate solely due to anxiety
- ✗ Minimise cumulative harm
- ✗ Ignore the child's voice
- ✗ Treat uncertainty as evidence
- ✗ Accept historical narratives without testing current reality



REASONABLE CAUSE TO SUSPECT SIGNIFICANT HARM

The Section 47 Threshold Explained in Law, Practice, and Decision-Making



1. THE PRINCIPLE

Section 47(1)(b) of the Children Act 1989 states that where a local authority:

"have reasonable cause to suspect that a child who lives, or is found, in their area is suffering, or is likely to suffer, significant harm, the authority shall make, or cause to be made, such enquiries as they consider necessary..."

The law does not ask "Can you prove abuse?" The law asks:

"Is there enough objectively rational information for a reasonable professional to suspect significant harm may be occurring or may occur?"

That distinction is fundamental.

THE LAW DOES NOT ASK:

✗ "Can you prove abuse?"

THE LAW ASKS:

✓ "Is there enough objectively rational information for a reasonable professional to suspect significant harm may be occurring or may occur?"



2. REASONABLE CAUSE

Reasonable cause means there is an objectively defensible basis, grounded in observable information, credible disclosure, behavioural indicators, professional observation, contextual evidence, pattern, or multi-agency information, that would lead a reasonable safeguarding professional to consider the possibility of significant harm serious enough to require the local authority to make enquiries (statutory child protection enquiry).

Reasonable cause is therefore:

- ✓ evidence-informed
- ✓ rational
- ✓ explainable
- ✓ proportionate
- ✓ professionally defensible

It is not:

- ✗ instinct alone
- ✗ fear alone
- ✗ organisational anxiety
- ✗ prejudice
- ✗ moral judgement
- ✗ vague discomfort



3. TO SUSPECT

To suspect means to recognise the realistic possibility of significant harm based on the available information, without requiring certainty, corroboration, proof, diagnosis, or concluded findings of fact.

Suspicion exists:

- before proof
- before certainty
- before court findings
- and often before the full picture is known.

This is intentional. Because safeguarding law recognises: children may not disclose clearly, abuse is often hidden, harm may be cumulative, coercion distorts presentation, and waiting for certainty may itself expose children to escalating harm.



4. REMEMBER

The threshold must remain:

- sufficiently low to protect children early, but also
- sufficiently disciplined to avoid oppressive over-intervention.

Because state intervention itself carries power: surveillance, intrusion, stigma, family disruption, relational harm, and potential trauma.

Poor thresholds lead to:

- ✗ bias
- ✗ over-surveillance
- ✗ racial disproportionality
- ✗ poverty-pathologising
- ✗ oppressive practice



5. AVOID ENDING WITH

TOO HIGH A THRESHOLD

Waiting for certainty, admission, visible injury or proof can leave children exposed to escalating harm.



TOO LOW A THRESHOLD

Treating vague unease, cultural unfamiliarity, poverty or instinct alone as sufficient suspicion is oppressive, disproportionate and legally unsafe.



6. THE ACTUAL POSITION

Reasonable cause to suspect sits between two dangerous extremes:

UNSAFE POSITION

"We need proof first."
Children remain unsafe while professionals wait.



LAWFUL POSITION

There must be enough evidence, indicators, disclosure, observation, pattern, or contextual information to make suspicion objectively reasonable — even though certainty is absent.



UNSAFE POSITION

"Any concern equals threshold."
Families experience disproportionate intrusion without sufficient basis.

7. WHAT YOU NEED IN PRACTICE IS:

PROFESSIONALS DO NOT NEED:

- ✗ proof
- ✗ corroboration
- ✗ completed assessment
- ✗ medical confirmation
- ✗ criminal evidence
- ✗ multiple agencies agreeing
- ✗ admission by parents
- ✗ certainty



PROFESSIONALS DO NEED:

- ✓ identifiable information
- ✓ observable indicators
- ✓ credible concern
- ✓ rational analysis
- ✓ evidence-linked reasoning
- ✓ safeguarding rationale
- ✓ ability to explain why suspicion is reasonable



11. THE CENTRAL PRINCIPLE

Reasonable cause to suspect significant harm is not proof, certainty, or accusation.

It is the point at which the available information makes the possibility of significant harm serious enough that the law requires formal safeguarding enquiry rather than passive observation.

Safeguarding remains lawful only when suspicion is grounded in objectively identifiable information rather than fear, bias, assumption, or oppressive overreach.



8. STRAIGHTFORWARD PRACTICE EXAMPLES

EXAMPLE 1 – THRESHOLD LIKELY MET



A 7-year-old repeatedly attends school hungry, exhausted, smelling strongly of urine, and discloses there is often no food at home. School records show chronic absence and deterioration in emotional presentation. Mother is frequently intoxicated during school collection. Police have attended domestic abuse incidents twice in the last month.

Why threshold is likely met:

- ✓ direct indicators and disclosure
- ✓ observable neglect and behavioural impact
- ✓ multi-agency concerns
- ✓ cumulative evidence

This creates reasonable cause to suspect significant harm through neglect and emotional harm.

A Section 47 enquiry would likely be justified.



9. CONCERN vs REASONABLE CAUSE

CONCERN



"Something may not be right."

Concern alone may justify:

- curiosity
- assessment
- monitoring
- support
- information gathering

REASONABLE CAUSE TO SUSPECT



"There is enough identifiable information to rationally suspect significant harm may be occurring or likely to occur."

This justifies:

- strategy discussion
- Section 47 enquiries
- formal safeguarding investigation
- multi-agency coordination

EXAMPLE 2 – THRESHOLD LIKELY NOT MET YET



A parent appears defensive during meetings and declines one home visit. The child is well-presented, attending school, progressing developmentally, and no direct indicators of harm are identified. No disclosures, injuries, behavioural changes, or multi-agency safeguarding concerns are evidenced.

Why threshold is not met:

- ✗ no direct indicators or disclosures
- ✗ no behavioural or physical concerns
- ✗ no multi-agency safeguarding evidence

This may justify:

- continued
- assessment
- relationship-building
- gathering
- Early Help

but not necessarily Section 47 threshold.

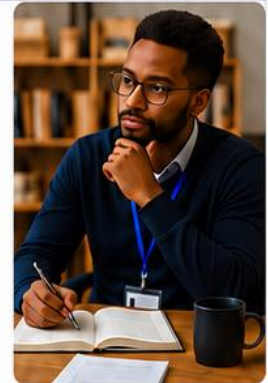


10. PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT

Reasonable cause is not a checklist. It is a threshold applied through professional judgement, grounded in evidence, and tested through reasoning.

Good safeguarding judgement requires professionals to ask:

- What is observed?
- What is reported?
- What is inferred?
- What is evidenced?
- What remains uncertain?
- What makes the suspicion objectively reasonable?
- What are the risks of acting?
- What are the risks of not acting?



11. RECORD THE THRESHOLD PROPERLY

POOR RECORDING

"Concerns remain."



BETTER RECORDING

"There is reasonable cause to suspect significant harm because the child has presented repeatedly hungry and exhausted, school attendance has deteriorated, police incidents evidence repeated domestic abuse exposure, and the child disclosed inconsistent access to food and supervision. While further enquiries are required to establish the full extent of harm, the cumulative information provides an objectively reasonable basis for Section 47 enquiry."



12. THE CENTRAL PRINCIPLE



Reasonable cause to suspect significant harm is not:

- ✗ proof
- ✗ certainty
- ✗ accusation

It is the point at which the available information makes the possibility of significant harm serious enough that the law requires formal safeguarding enquiry rather than passive observation.

Safeguarding remains lawful only when suspicion is grounded in objectively identifiable information rather than fear, bias, assumption, or oppressive overreach.



13. RAPID THRESHOLD DECISION-MAKING TEMPLATE

For Live Strategy Discussions



STEP 1

What is the specific safeguarding issue?

- What are we worried about?
- What type of harm is suspected?
- Is this:
 - concern
 - unmet need
 - risk
 - harm
 - or suspected significant harm?



STEP 2

What evidence makes the suspicion reasonable?

- What has been directly observed?
- What has been disclosed?
- What patterns exist?
- What indicators are present?
- What is corroborated?
- What remains uncertain?
- What don't we actually know?



STEP 3

What is the child currently experiencing?

- What is life like for the child day-to-day?
- What impact is evident?
- How is the child presenting emotionally, behaviourally, physically, developmentally, relationally?
- What has kept the child safe so far and why is not working anymore?



STEP 4

Why might this meet Section 47 threshold?

- Is there reasonable cause to suspect significant harm?
- What specifically makes the suspicion reasonable?
- Is the harm:
 - serious
 - cumulative
 - escalating
 - chronic
 - or likely?



STEP 5

What is the proportional next step?

- THRESHOLD LIKELY MET**
- Section 47 enquiry
 - Immediate safeguarding action
 - Multi-agency investigation

THRESHOLD LIKELY NOT MET

- Universal services / Early Help
- Continued assessment
- Information gathering
- Safety planning



14. RAPID STRATEGY DISCUSSION FORMULATION TEMPLATE

"There is / is not reasonable cause to suspect significant harm because [specific evidence]. The suspicion is based on [observations / disclosures / patterns / information]. The current evidence suggests the child may be experiencing [harm / risk]. While some information remains unconfirmed, the available evidence is / is not sufficient to justify Section 47 enquiries at this stage because [threshold rationale]."



Be specific



Link to evidence



Explain reasoning



Name uncertainty



Justify proportionate response