

Letter Before Proceedings

The Letter Before Proceedings is a letter that is sent to parents when Children's Services are thinking about starting care proceedings. It outlines the main concerns and identifies the help that has been provided by Children's Services so far.

Most Children's Services will have their own internal procedures and templates for practitioners to use when writing a Letter Before Proceedings. Social workers are advised to first consult with their local procedures when writing one.

An example of a Letter Before Proceedings can be found here: [Bradford Council Children's Services PLO letter example](#)

Overall, the letter should invite the parents to a Pre-Proceedings (PLO) Meeting and advise them to find a Solicitor who specialises in family law and to get their wider family involved. The Letter Before Proceedings triggers free legal advice for parents which helps them to understand the seriousness of the concerns. The letter should:

- > Be sent to all the parents and adults who have parental responsibility for the relevant children.
- > Be clear about the seriousness of the matter.
- > Provide sufficient detail to inform the parents and their lawyers of the concerns and changes that need to be made, but be succinct.
- > Balance the concerns with acknowledgement of strengths within the family.
- > Invite the parents to a pre-proceedings meeting, with reasonable notice of the meeting.
- > Identify what the meeting will talk about, including the offer to work with the parents to address the identified concerns.
- > Provide the date, time and location of the meeting and details of who will be invited.
- > Ensure that arrangements are in place to hold separate meetings for parents to manage conflict or any risk to any of the adults.
- > Consider whether the parent will need access to an advocate or intermediary service through the process.
- > Advise the parent to take the letter to a solicitor for free advice via their entitlement to legal aid.
- > Attach an up-to-date list of children law accredited solicitors in the local area.

Writing a Letter Before Proceedings

A Letter Before Proceedings should be drafted with care, recognising that this will be stressful and frightening for parents to receive and they may require support to understand and act upon it. Social workers may also want to consider the impact on the children and wider family of receiving the letter and what support the family may need during this time. When writing the letter social workers should ensure that they:

- > Write directly to the person who will receive the letter using their name throughout.
- > Be honest and respectful, trying to engage the adults rather than alienate them.
- > Be written clearly in plain language which is jargon-free and avoids abbreviations.
- > Ensure that the family have access to the letter in their first language if necessary.
- > Consider making personalised accommodations in how the letter is presented to ensure it is accessible to parents who have specific accessibility needs relating to language, literacy or disability.
- > Include brief evidence for concerns and give timescales for change.

Content of a Letter Before Proceedings:

The Letter Before Proceedings should include 3 main sections. This includes:

Main Concerns

- > These concerns should relate to the risks that are associated with the threshold of significant harm to the children that has been met in order to enter pre-proceedings.
- > It should be a succinct summary of main concerns and impact for the child(ren) and why it has left social workers worried about their safety.
- > Ensure that the information is evidence-based and can be relied on in court if necessary.

What support Children's Services have offered to try and help the family

- > Social workers should avoid writing that support has been provided through a plan such as CIN or CP – parents and carers are unlikely to recognise this process as a support.
- > Include a description of an intervention or specific form of support that has been provided and the desired outcome for the child(ren) from this support.

What the parents need to do and the support that will be offered to avoid going to Court, including the timescales

- > This section should detail clearly the priority areas of action for parents to take;
- > Actions should relate to concrete changes in the parent's behaviour and parenting and the support available to them to achieve this, rather than jumping through hoops of attending a class or service.
- > Social workers should make sure that they make clear what the desired outcome and impact for the child will be. This is meant to motivate the parent and help them understand why the changes are needed.
- > The letter should be specific in terms of expected timescales.

Overall, when writing and sharing the letter, social workers should consider:

- > Is the letter written in a way that will be accessible and understood by the parent?
- > Does the letter need to be translated into the parent's first language?
- > Will it be best for the letter to be hand delivered or sent by a form of tracked delivery?
- > Will the parent need some support (professional or via family) to read or understand it?
- > Does the parent need to be referred for an advocate?
- > Do the parents, children or relevant family members have any disabilities that may impact on where the meeting is held?
- > Should the delivery of the letter be accompanied by a social work visit before any formal meeting to explain the contents?
- > What is the likely impact on the parents and family on receiving the letter? How will any increasing risks be addressed and supported?
- > What support will the children need to understand what is happening?

Additional Resources:

[What should a letter before proceedings include? - Family Rights Group \(frg.org.uk\)](https://www.frg.org.uk)

[A parent's perspective on a PLO letter \(adcs.org.uk\)](https://www.adcs.org.uk)