



One minute guide

Public Law Outline - Pre-Proceedings

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What is Public Law Outline?

The Public Law Outline (PLO) sets out the duties local authorities have when considering taking a case to court to ask for a [Care Order](#) to take a child into care or for a [Supervision Order](#) to be made. This is often described as initiating public law care proceedings.

Under [Section 31 Children Act 1989](#), a court may only make a Care Order or Supervision Order if it is satisfied that the [Threshold Criteria](#) have been met. Under the [Public Law Outline \(2014\)](#) and the [Children and Families Act 2014](#), guidance states that care and supervision proceedings should be completed within 26 weeks.

Where the concerns about a child are not being addressed or reduced and the child/ unborn child remains at risk of harm, it is the decision of the local authority via a Legal Gateway Meeting (Decision and Review Panel - DARP) as to whether a child should become subject to **Pre-Proceedings (PLO)**. In many cases, when Pre-Proceedings (PLO) are initiated, the child has been subject to a Child Protection (CP) Plan but insufficient progress has been made, or, may have been accommodated (under s20) with parents' agreement. Child protection core group meetings and conferences or child looked after reviews continue alongside the PLO process. Pre-Proceedings (PLO) may not be offered in circumstances when the child is deemed to be at immediate risk and the issues need to be presented to court to make decisions to ensure the children is safeguarded.

What does pre-proceedings work include?

When senior managers and Legal decide, via DARP, to initiate Pre-Proceedings (PLO) work with the family, specific actions must be taken from the date of the decision. These include:

Letter Before Proceedings: This letter follows a set format, including a specific version for unborn children. It outlines the events leading to Pre-Proceedings, the interventions and support provided by the Local Authority to help the family address concerns. The letter clearly sets out the Local Authority's current concerns that impact the child's safety and welfare and specifies the changes parents must make to prevent the case from escalating to court. The letter is issued within five working days of the decision to initiate pre-proceedings (PLO) and advises parents to seek a family law solicitor to access free legal advice.

Pre-Proceedings Meeting: This takes place within seven working days of the parents receiving the letter, to determine whether agreement can be reached on the necessary actions to protect the child from harm, thereby avoiding court proceedings. The meeting includes the parents, the Local Authority and both of their respective legal representatives. During the meeting, safeguarding concerns are outlined, the support being offered is explained, and the specific actions parents must take to reduce these concerns —sometimes referred to as 'bottom line' actions—are set out. Additional support and assessments are offered to help families overcome barriers preventing them from making changes. Parents are also encouraged to consider wider family networks for support/ contingency planning if they are unable to improve the child's situation. These actions become the priority actions within the Child Protection Plan. The meeting must be formally recorded in minutes, **distributed within seven working days**.

Period of change: This is the period for parents to implement the agreed changes to address concerns. The Local Authority provides support and monitors progress through measures such as child protection core group meetings and conferences.

Pre-Proceedings Review: This meeting takes place within six to eight weeks of the initial Pre-Proceedings Meeting to review progress against the agreed bottom-line actions. Pre-Proceedings should typically conclude within 12 to 18 weeks, either ending due to sufficient progress or advancing to court proceedings.

What are the possible outcomes of the Pre-Proceedings (PLO) Review?

There are three possible outcomes of the Pre-Proceedings (PLO) Review:

PLO ends as progress has been made: If parents successfully complete the required 'bottom line' actions to reduce concerns, the Local Authority may decide that care proceedings are no longer necessary, bringing the pre-proceedings process to an end.

The Child Protection Plan will continue unless significant progress has been made, in which case a Child in Need (CIN) Plan may be more appropriate, or social work involvement may no longer be required.

A recommendation to end PLO, along with the proposed CP or CIN plan for the child, should be submitted to the relevant Service Delivery Manager for a final decision.

PLO—further period of change: If further progress is deemed possible through continued pre-proceedings work, a recommendation may be made to extend the process and hold a second Pre-Proceedings Review. This review should take place within 6–8 weeks of the first review. However, PLO should not extend beyond 16 weeks.

Pursue care proceedings: If parents have made insufficient progress on the agreed actions, the relevant Children's Service Delivery Manager may, in exceptional circumstances, approve an extended period for change, and will record the rationale for this. Otherwise the case should be presented to the Children's Social Work Decision and Review Panel to consider initiating care proceedings.

What happens if the local authority decide to initiate care proceedings?

The Decision and Review Panel (DARP) must approve the initiation of care proceedings. Panel members must be satisfied that the necessary pre-proceedings work has been completed and that the [Threshold Criteria](#) for significant harm is met.

Through Children's Legal Services, an application for care proceedings will be made to the court, and the parents will be notified by letter.

The letter advises parents to seek a solicitor who specialises in family law. It is sent within two weeks of the decision made by the Decision and Review Panel.

For more information

You can read more about Pre-Proceedings (PLO) in '[Court Orders and Pre-Proceedings for local authorities, April 2014](#)' - Department for Education and in the Leeds Children's Social Work Service [Procedures Manual](#).