



Signs Child at Risk Policy

Abstract

Signs is a digital safeguarding system, accessible through PRONTO on both desktop computers, laptops, and force smart phones (MDT). All officers and staff who have public contact have access to Pronto and the ability to use Signs to submit safeguarding referrals

Supporting Documents

- [Working Together to Safeguard Children](#)
- [APP Child Abuse Guidance](#)

Policy

1. Introduction

1.1 Signs is a digital safeguarding system, accessible through PRONTO on both desktop computers, laptops, and force smart phones (MDT). All officers and staff who have public contact have access to Pronto and the ability to use Signs to submit safeguarding referrals.

1.2 Signs covers multiple processes including DA, HBA and fraud. This policy specifically covers the '**Child at Risk**' element.

2 Scope

2.1 The purpose of this policy/procedure document is to cover both the circumstances of when a Child at Risk Signs needs to be completed, and the information that needs to be included within it.

2.2 Information sharing via Child at Risk Signs is a vital part of safeguarding children. It facilitates early and effective identification of risk, joint decision making and coordinated action. It helps all partner agencies build a more complete picture and identify any safeguarding concerns or emerging problems that may require intervention ('joining up the dots'). Serious Case Reviews often record that a failure to share information has been a key factor in the failure to protect children.

3. Statement

3.1 Information sharing between safeguarding agencies is often a key topic at inquests. The quality of the police Signs, or the lack of a Signs could be scrutinised by the coroner following a death, or by PSD or the IOPC following a serious incident.

3.1 For the reasons highlighted above, it is critical that a Signs is completed promptly, when required, and that it contains relevant detail and information.

Procedure

1. Introduction

1.1 IDENTIFYING WHEN A CHILD AT RISK SIGNS IS REQUIRED

1.2 The general purpose of Signs, is to help officers with raising and recording concerns and observations about the needs, vulnerabilities, and risk issues of subjects, following them coming to the notice of police.

1.3 The purpose of the Child at Risk sub-category, is to provide information to Children's Social services, where the Police believe, Social Services may need to take some action to safeguard a child or work with a family ('child' has the standard meaning of anyone under the age of 18).

1.4 If the police do not believe that Children's Social Services need to take action, then there is no requirement to share the Signs. In fact, Social Services have no obligation or legal power to take the Signs when they are not going to act, as they do not have an intelligence or information gathering function. It is for this reason that it is important that we only share the right type of information, in the right circumstances. Otherwise, we run the risk of overwhelming Social Services and diluting their capability to help children that are genuinely in need.

1.5 Police are not trained to make definitive assessments on Social Care or Mental Health needs or the potential support required (even specialist officers in the Police Single Point of Access - PSPA). When deciding whether to submit a Child at Risk Signs, Officers/staff must base any assessment of a child on reasonable judgement and observation, as well as information passed to them that they believe to be reliable - then apply the principles set out in this policy.

1.6 Similarly, concerns around a subject's mental Health in isolation is not necessarily a matter for Children's Services to deal with. However, if left unchecked it may develop into Social Care needs, and police are not trained to make this assessment. So, police should consider mental health concerns when making a decision on completing a Child

at Risk Signs. Ultimately PSPA will make the decision as to whether the information requires sharing with Children's Social Care.

1.7 A Child to Notice Signs is **NOT** required for every contact Police have with a child. As explained above, the aim is to provide Children's Social services with good quality information, for children that require Social Services action. Social services do not need to intervene for all children, or in every circumstance when a child interacts with or comes to the attention of the police.

1.8 It is for the **reporting officer/staff** to decide and justify whether a Signs is required or not, based on this policy and their own reasonable judgement.

1.9 The PSPA are available within office hours, Mon-Fri. The hunt number is **01483 636451**. They can provide guidance on Signs and access Children's Social Services information to see if a child is currently open to any Children's Service Team.

1.10 If you are unsure or unable to seek advice or clarification on whether a Signs is required or not, **submit a Signs**. There will be no criticism for erring on the side of caution.

1.11 When a Signs is required, it must be completed **prior to the termination of duty. There are no exceptions.**

1.12 There are both general principles and mandatory circumstances when a Child at Risk Signs must be submitted.

1.13 The general principles for when a Child at Risk Signs must be submitted, are that a child has **Care and Support needs, and they are not being met** (even if support is in place). Or they are at risk of **Abuse / Neglect / Crime / Exploitation**.

1.14 Care and Support Needs - is to be viewed as a simple and broad definition. Does the child have any social / behavioural / disability / medical / developmental / educational / mental health or medical conditions – (regardless of any support that is already in place). If so, we should be submitting a Child at Risk if their needs are not being met. Again, 'needs being met' should be considered in simple and broad terms. Are they able to live a healthy, safe and fulfilling life? Are they hitting developmental and education milestones, that would be in line with peers? When completing your referral, highlight these things in your observations. The list of potential issues is obviously very wide but give as much detail as possible about what you have identified and the impact on the child.

1.15 Abuse / Neglect / Crime / Exploitation – For concerns around these matters, a Signs Child at Risk would be required whether the child is a victim or a perpetrator. The child may not necessarily be a direct victim, for example they may be a witness or in the vicinity. If the crime has an impact on their care/wellbeing/mental health etc. Then a Signs should be submitted.

1.16 Always remember to think wider, and about all children involved. While it may seem obvious to submit a Signs for the children of the victim, have you considered if the suspect has children and if they are at risk?

1.17 Risk factors to be considered where identifying a Signs may be required.

- **Physical Harm** – this includes hitting, shaking, throwing, poisoning, burning scalding, causing or fabricating ill health
- **Emotional Abuse** – this is the persistent emotional ill treatment of a child which causes adverse effects on a Childs emotional development
- **Sexual Abuse** – includes forcing or enticing a child to take part in or view sexual activity
- **Neglect** – includes failing to provide adequate food, clothing, medical aid or accommodation
- **Significant Harm** – this may be a single traumatic event, a compilation of events, or suffering through witnessing the ill treatment of others, such as witnessing domestic abuse
- **Repeated presentation at hospital with unknown injuries**
- **Young age** (pre-verbal children and pre-mobile children are especially vulnerable to abuse)
- **Disability**
- **Self-harm or threats/attempts to commit suicide**
- **Evidence of sexual activity or inappropriate sexualised behaviour**
- **Social isolation**
- **History of mental ill-health**
- **Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE) indicators** – [LINK](#) for further details
- **Child Criminal Exploitation (CCE) indicators** – [LINK](#) for further details

1.18 Risk factors relating to those in contact with children that may indicate a Signs is required (may be current or previous).

- **Violent or sexual offending**
- **Child abuse**
- **Domestic abuse**

- **Abuse of animals**
- **Grooming**
- **Failure to provide medical care for a child**
- **Threats or attempts to self-harm or commit suicide**
- **Misuse of illegal or prescription drugs and or alcohol**
- **Mental ill-health**
- **Failure to take responsibility for previous abuse**

1.19 Listed below are the situations, where a Child at Risk Signs MUST be completed, as these are deemed to automatically meet the required criteria for PSPA review. PSPA will make an assessment regarding onward sharing with partners.

- **CRIME** - A child is arrested and brought into Police custody (including out of custody cases of voluntary attendance) and all under 18's who are named suspects in criminal investigations (whether or not they are taken into custody).
- **STOP AND SEARCH** – Whenever a child is subject to a stop and search by police.
- **MISSING** - In all occurrences where a child goes missing (including those dealt with as concern for safety) a Signs must be completed. As well as highlighting concerns to Social Services, this helps them facilitate their risk management obligations. For example, they hold a mandatory strategy meeting for every child missing more than 24 hours. When the missing child is located, if there is further information or additional risk identified, a further Signs should be completed.
- **SUDDEN DEATH** - All child deaths, or if a child's parent/carer/guardian has died.
- **DOMESTIC ABUSE** - Whenever there is a child associated with a household where there has been a domestic incident (whether or not the child was present at the time)
- **DOMESTIC VIOLENCE DISCLOSURE SCHEME (DVDS)** – following a disclosure having been made, referencing any relevant children linked to the subject or recipient.
- **CHILD SEXUAL OFFENCES DISCLOSURE SCHEME (CSODS)** – following a disclosure having been made, referencing any relevant children linked to the subject or recipient.
- **CHILD PROTECTION FLAG** - For all incidents where there is a Child Protection Warning Flag on NICHE. This is whether the child is present or not.
- **PARENT / CARER / GUARDIAN** - Whenever an adult has come to the notice of police, that places any child in their care at risk. **POSITION OF TRUST** – For any associated child, when the issue relates to an adult that is in a position of trust over children.
- **PREGNANT CHILDREN** – for any child, who is/suspected to be pregnant

- **SEXUAL ABUSE** – Where there is cause for concern that a child has been subjected to sexual or criminal exploitation
- **EXTREMISM OR FIXATED WITH VIOLENCE** – Any child showing these characteristics should be referred to PSPA.
- **SECTION 136 MHA** – A Signs should be completed if a child is subject to Section 136 Mental Health Act (or any other MH power – where police have been involved)
- **OPPORTUNITY TO INTERVENE EARLY** - For all incidents involving a child (and unborn babies), where the police believe there may be a risk of harm or an opportunity for partner agencies to provide support. If in any doubt, ask yourself “do they need help?”

1.20 This means that by exception, a Child at Risk Signs is **NOT** required when an officer is able to identify with certainty, that there is no identifiable concern for the child AND none of the mandatory categories apply. For example, a simple theft of a bike from a child, with no vulnerabilities or issues would not normally require a Signs. However, if the child was refusing to go to school because the suspect for the bike theft attends the same school, then a Signs would be required.

1.21 Even in cases where there is no apparent concern for the child, **the following two questions should always be considered by the submitting officer/staff.**

- **Is the child likely to be known to Children’s Social Services?** Have there been a lot of previous Signs? Have they had a recent child case conference? Is there a family file on NICHE? Have they had a recent intervention from social services?
- **Is this current incident part of something bigger?** Have they had more than one recent contact with police? Have other incidents happened where Signs haven’t been submitted? Is there a pattern or trend emerging?

If the answer to either of these questions is ‘yes’, then submit a Signs. This helps ensure that smaller pieces of a larger picture are not missed. In these situations, explain what has prompted you to submit a Signs.

1.22 If a Signs is not completed following contact with a child, the rationale must be recorded on NICHE. Occurrences may be reviewed as part of wider safeguarding as well as by supervisors, so it must be clear why a Signs has been considered and discounted. This also helps Police teams that deal with occurrence management, as they will know it has been considered.

1.23 Where there are repeat visits to a location, then a Signs should be completed every time it is required. For example, you visit a vulnerable child twice within 24 hours. The

fact that the vulnerabilities identified are the same on both occasions does not matter, if a Signs is required it should be completed each time. This helps highlight urgency and repetition to both PSPA and Social Services. A common-sense approach using professional judgement is acceptable. For example, if you drop a vulnerable child home after they have been subject to an incident, and you re-attend after an hour to allow them to calm down/eat a meal/get changed, this will only require a single Signs.

2. WHAT INFORMATION SHOULD / SHOULD NOT GO IN A CHILD AT RISK SIGNS

2.1 There are 2 main concepts to remember with Child at Risk Signs.

- They will be shared with Children's Services, who do not have access to NICHE. So, they cannot research deeper than the information provided on the Signs. For that reason, the information on the Signs needs to be able to be understood in its own right.
- They are used to explain to Children's Services, that we believe they need to take action to safeguard a child. So, we need to clearly identify the concerns and the impact that they are having on the child.

Every field within the Signs should be completed, with consideration to these concepts.

3. 'Niche incident summary' field

3.1. This should be considered as the 'blurb' of the incident. This field is included in the automatic OP ENCOMPASS emails, so must be suitable for sharing with schools. When automation is used this field acts like a summary so that Signs reviewers can quickly scan Signs history and understand it, without having to read the full documents. Therefore, it should be concise and clear such as

'Domestic incident whereby male has thrown a mug at female partner causing a cut to the head. Witnessed by 5-year-old child'

4. 'Incident detailed summary' field

4.1 This field acts as the detailed incident account for the whole form – similar to the Occurrence Enquiry Log (OEL) on NICHE. Each individual person is then attached below and will have their own risk assessment questions. Therefore, this summary should be used to explain the incident and general actions.

4.2 Set a basic scene and reason for Police attendance. Use clear simple language. Do not use police jargon or acronyms. Explain the actions you have taken and remember to include any outcomes or anything that may impact on safeguarding, for example arresting a suspect, bail conditions etc.

5. 'Risk factors' and 'Child concern' sections

5.1 Signs is a guided form and where detailed information is required, there is an explanation attached to the questions. In terms of general principles;

5.2 Give as much detail as possible around the concerns you have identified, the impact they are having and what help/support you think the subject needs. Police cannot make definitive assessments on Social Care or Mental health issues, so avoid using any language or terms that implies this. However, you can relay information that you have been told, so long as it is clear it has come from the subject themselves or a third party.

5.3 Remember **The Voice of the Child**. Often officers/staff either forget or are reluctant to include the thoughts/concerns/opinions of the child. Often this is critical for identifying risk or what help is actually required. Remember, you can speak to children alone away from parents if justifiable. Safeguarding conversations are not PACE controlled, so there is no legal requirement for an appropriate adult. Some points things to consider are

- The parent/adult might be a perpetrator, so consider where the child is spoken to, so the child is not pressured or unduly influenced by family members.
- Record the child's direct replies and responses, don't paraphrase, or change the language.
- Note the child's non-verbal communication, their body language and how they present.

Further guidance on voice of the child can be found [here](#).

5.4 Include professional factual observations but avoid opinions or language that is potentially derogatory. Be conscious of the type of language used to ensure it is not 'victim blaming'. Consider the impact of trauma on subjects, using a trauma informed approach. Remember Signs is potentially disclosable in numerous situations, including Coroners Court. There is potential for inappropriate comment/language to have significant impact on these processes.

5.5 Explain relationships between the subjects you are listing. Particularly parents/carers. As detailed above, Social Services are unable to access NICHE so we must explain the involvement of every subject we identify, and the family makeup as this can be complicated.

5.6 Contact details are vital for all key subjects, especially parents or carers for children. If we are asking Social Services to take action to safeguard, then we must provide them with the ability to be able to contact the subjects. Include as much as possible, but phone numbers are always preferable. Don't be put off if you are concerned that a contact method or phone number may not be 'safe' or will put a subject at risk. Include it in the Signs and note in the comments that the number is 'not confirmed as safe'.

6.The following must NOT be included in a Signs

- **Complete copy and paste of the OEL** – they rarely are concise enough or give the right information. There is also the risk of disclosing sensitive information without a proper purpose – for example addresses, telephone numbers and witness details.
- **Unnecessary or excessive information** – keep the information concise and relevant to your concerns.
- **Unrelated Intelligence** – Intelligence relating to the risks and issues identified can be included and will be assessed by PSPA for sharing. Please make sure any intelligence is highlighted. If the intelligence does not relate to the risk and issues, complete a 3x5x2.
- **Unmanaged risk** – keeping people safe is a core Police function and a statutory duty. We cannot pass risk to social services if we have the immediate ability to take action to keep people safe. A Signs may take several days to be reviewed by PSPA and shared with Social Services (although in most circumstances it will be a lot quicker – particularly when graded as High, which have a target of next working day). Therefore, by submitting a Signs you are acknowledging that the risk has been managed to a level where it is suitable to wait for up to this length of time, for it to be reviewed. If not, there are various other actions that can be taken to manage risk, such as repeat visits, Police protection powers, Emergency duty Team, Mental Health Crisis line etc. A Signs should still be submitted in parallel with any action taken and the action taken should be explained in the Signs
- **References to 'see OEL' / 'PNC' or other systems** – Social services have no access so all relevant information must be included.

7.CONSENT

7.1 The Police do not need the consent of the child, parent/carer/guardian to complete a Signs and share it with the PSPA. This is as long as the principles of when a Signs Child

at Risk (outlined in this policy) have been followed. You must not let others influence your decision and should follow this policy.

7.2 Surrey Police PSPA will use their agreed processes, in accordance with the Multi-Agency Information Sharing Process (and other procedures) to establish whether the Signs needs to be shared externally with safeguarding partners.

7.3 However, although consent is not required, wherever it is possible to do so, those completing a Signs Child at Risk must advise (whoever is suitable in the circumstances) that a Signs is being submitted and that they may receive contact from Social Services. Avoid using the technical term 'Signs' and say, 'Safeguarding form' or similar as this is more likely to be understood by the recipient.

7.4 Consent to share a Signs is different totally separate to the consent that Social Services may need to work with a child/family. There are sections on the Signs that deal with this secondary consent. If the parent/carer/guardian consents at this stage to voluntary contact from social services, it should always be recorded as it can make intervention from Social Services quicker and easier.

8. SUBMITTING A CHILD AT RISK SIGNS TO PSPA FOR REVIEW

8.1 Signs will automatically apply a risk grading to a submission, based on the risk categories selected. There is an option for the submitter to increase the risk if required. As a general principle, **remember to grade on ongoing risk**, rather than current risk. For example, the arrest of a suspect may minimise current risk, but what happens to the risk if they are released from custody?

8.2 If the Child at Risk questions are selected by an officer/staff on a Signs, once they have completed the form, Pronto will send a NICHE tasking to PSPA. Pronto will also attach the Signs to NICHE. In normal operation, this is automatic and there is no requirement for the officer/staff to undertake any further steps.

8.3 However, it is **CRITICAL** that officers check that Pronto has not raised any errors when syncing, as this may mean that the Signs is not attached to NICHE or been sent to PSPA for review. Once Pronto has finished syncing, it will display a final screen highlighting any issues. If unsure, check NICHE to see if the documents have been attached and a task created. All officers with a Pronto account have access to Pronto Manager, where the Signs can be manually downloaded if required.

8.4 Signs that are received by PSPA will be reviewed to see if they meet the criteria to share with Children's Social Services. They will be prioritised by the BRAG rating, so it

is important that if the concerns are serious/urgent/time critical that they are BRAG rated correctly.

8.5 If a Signs *is* shared with Social Services, it can trigger several levels of intervention, ranging from advice and guidance, up to the use of statutory powers. All of which are aimed at promoting safeguarding for vulnerable children.

8.6 PSPA will place an update onto the Signs itself, this is where you should check to see if your Signs has been processed and what the outcome was. PSPA no longer regularly update the OEL.

8.7 Children's Social Services aim to provide an 'outcome' for each Child at Risk Signs that they process. There is an automated process that will add the outcome to the relevant Niche OEL and task the OIC for that occurrence. This will normally be within 7 days of the Signs being shared but can vary. If the outcome of a Signs is required or there are any queries over the outcome, officers/staff should contact PSPA.

9. SUPERVISOR MANAGEMENT OF SIGNS OCCURRENCES

9.1 Supervisors should regularly check the quality of the Signs that their team are creating. By finalising an occurrence (particularly as no further action) supervisors are validating that the correct safeguarding information has been recorded and passed to PSPA.

9.2 In general use, NICHE will not allow for an occurrence to be finalised with open taskings. When supervisors close all tasks without care, in order to file an occurrence, they may close the PSPA Signs tasking. If the Signs tasking to PSPA is closed, prior to PSPA reviewing the Signs, then it will not be reviewed and shared. The Signs will sit unchecked on the occurrence.

9.3 For this reason, an occurrence should not be closed until the Signs has been reviewed by PSPA. This is best practice. However, if there is an urgent need to file an occurrence prior to the Signs being reviewed, it is the filers responsibility to re-open and re-task the Signs task to PSPA, once the occurrence has been filed.

9.4 NICHE is fully auditable as to when tasks were closed, and this may be reviewed should there be a serious incident or adverse outcome and lack of multi-agency information sharing is called into question.