

The Girl Speaks



Who Are Social Services
Supposed to Be?

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“They were meant to help us hold on. Instead, we learned to hold ourselves together.”

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Who Are Social Services Supposed to Be?

Social services were created with a simple intention:

To protect children.

To support families.

To help — not to harm.

At their best, social workers are meant to:

- *Offer help early, before things fall apart*
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- *Work with families, not against them*
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- *Understand the whole story, not just one piece*
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- *Safeguard children by supporting their parents, not just removing them*
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- *Be a voice for vulnerable people, not a weapon against them*

They are meant to bring compassion, curiosity, and care to some of the hardest moments a family might ever face.

That is the promise.

But for many families, the reality feels very different.

Help is offered only after a crisis — or not at all.

Words like “support” can be used to justify surveillance.

Stories are misunderstood, or reduced to a single narrative.

Parents feel watched, not supported.

Children feel lost in the process, not centred in it.

What was meant to protect ends up causing harm.

What was meant to listen becomes a system that speaks about families, not with them.

This guide does not exist to attack — it exists to reclaim space.

Because when the system forgets its promise, families must remember it for themselves.

Who's Who in Social Services?

The term “social worker” is often used as if it means just one person.

But as a case moves through different stages, you may meet several professionals, each with a slightly different role.

Each change can feel like a reset.

You tell your story again. You build trust again. And sometimes, you're met with someone who already has an opinion before they've even heard you speak.

*Understanding who is who won't fix the system —
But it might help you feel a little less lost inside it.*

Here's a gentle breakdown:



■ *Early Help or Assessment Social Worker*

This is often the first person assigned when concerns are raised.

Their job is to assess risk and need, and decide whether ongoing involvement is necessary.

They might be friendly and casual, or formal and cautious. Sometimes both.

If things escalate or a Child Protection Plan is considered, this worker may change.

■ *Child Protection Social Worker*

If your case enters Child Protection, a different social worker often takes over.

They are responsible for managing Child in Need (CIN) or Child Protection Plans (CPP), leading multi-agency meetings, and writing formal reports.

They are usually the worker you'll see in court, if it reaches that stage.

They are meant to work closely with you and your child — though many families feel their voice disappears at this point.

■ *Looked After Children (LAC) / Long-Term Foster Care Social Worker*

If your child enters care, you may be assigned yet another worker.

This person is focused on the child's life within the system — their placement, school, emotional wellbeing, and contact arrangements.

They are often more involved with the foster carers than with you, and you may only hear from them around review dates or contact changes.

It can feel like your place as a parent is fading.

■ *Family Support Worker / Early Help Worker*

Not a qualified social worker — but often present early in a case, or alongside statutory services.

They might visit you at home, offer parenting support, or help with a particular plan.

They're often described as "lower level," but still hold influence in how you're seen.

■ *Team Manager*

The person who oversees the social workers.

You may never meet them – but they approve decisions, sign off on reports, and hold power behind the scenes.

They can be asked to review actions or complaints, but their answers may still reflect the culture of the team.

■ *Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO)*

Assigned when a child is in care.

Their role is to monitor whether the local authority is following the care plan and upholding the child's rights.

They chair review meetings and are supposed to act independently – but many families experience them as just another part of the system.

Some IROs are kind and balanced. Some are not.

Children's Guardian (CAFCASS)

If your case reaches court, a Children's Guardian is appointed.

They work for CAFCASS, not the local authority.

Their job is to represent the child's best interests from a legal perspective — often through their own observations, interviews, and a formal report.

They may meet with your child and speak with you briefly.

Their views can heavily influence a judge's decision, especially if they claim to be “neutral.”

Independent Social Worker (ISW)

An Independent Social Worker is not employed by the local authority.

They are usually brought in to carry out specialist assessments, often during court proceedings, or when there is concern about bias in the local authority's view.

They may be instructed by the court, a solicitor, or a parent seeking a second opinion.

ISWs are typically more experienced and may offer a fresh perspective — but they still report to the court and can hold considerable influence.

Some families find their insight validating. Others feel they echo the same narrative.

Why This Matters

*When you're in the middle of it all, it can feel like a blur
of names and changing faces.*

*Each new worker comes with their own opinion, their
own deadlines, their own version of the story.*

*It is disorienting. It is exhausting. And it is not your
fault.*

*You're not failing because you can't keep track —
The system was never built to be simple.*

*But you are here.
Still showing up.
Still holding on.*

*And that matters more than they may ever write in a
report.*

Their Words, Made Simpler

When you first step into this world, the words used by professionals can feel like a different language — formal, clinical, sometimes sharp.

This page doesn't translate everything. Just a few words you'll likely hear — and what they really mean in plain, human terms.

Threshold

What it means: The level of concern that social services believe justifies action.

In practice: If they say “threshold has been met,” it means they believe there's enough concern to stay involved, investigate further, or start a child protection plan.

You can gently ask: “Can you explain what threshold you believe has been met, and why?”

✚ Significant Harm

What it means: A legal term meaning harm that is serious enough to justify removing or intervening in a child's life.

In practice: It's subjective. It could mean emotional harm, neglect, physical harm, or risk of harm.

It doesn't always mean something has happened — just that they believe something might.

You can ask: "Can you help me understand what you mean by significant harm in our situation?"

✚ Neglect

What it means: A failure to meet a child's basic needs — food, hygiene, supervision, emotional care.

In practice: This is often the most misused or misunderstood category. Living in poverty, being overwhelmed, or having your own trauma can be labelled neglect.

You can ask: "What specific concerns are you seeing that meet the threshold for neglect?"

Parenting Capacity

What it means: Your ability to meet your child's needs now and in the future.

In practice: It can be judged based on your mental health, home life, responses in meetings, or how you interact under pressure.

It's not a fixed thing. Everyone has capacity to grow. You can say: "I'd like to understand how you're assessing my parenting capacity and what support you believe I need."

Working Agreement / Written Agreement

What it means: A document outlining what social services expect you to do — and what they'll do too.

In practice: It may feel like a contract, but it's not legally binding unless it becomes a court order.

You can ask to take it away and read it before signing. You can also request changes.

Care Order

What it means: A court order that gives the local authority parental responsibility for your child.

In practice: They can make most major decisions about your child's life — including where they live and who they see.

You still have parental responsibility too, but it becomes shared. In reality, they hold more power.

Voluntary Accommodation (Section 20)

What it means: You agree for your child to live somewhere else temporarily, often with foster carers.

In practice: It's called "voluntary," but many parents feel pressured. You still have full parental rights and can withdraw your consent — though this may trigger court.

Ask for everything in writing. Don't rush.

Best Interests

What it means: A legal term meaning decisions should reflect what's best for the child.

In practice: Professionals may have different ideas of what this means. It can be influenced by risk, bias, or incomplete information.

You can ask: "How are you determining what's in my child's best interests — and what weight are you giving to our bond, history, and their voice?"

Your Rights in Meetings

It's easy to forget — or be made to feel like you don't have any — but you do have rights in meetings with social services.

You are not just there to listen.

You are allowed to speak, to ask, to question, to pause.

You are a parent.

And that still matters.

🌿 You have the right to bring someone with you.

This could be a friend, family member, advocate, or support worker.

They don't have to speak — but they can help you feel less alone.

If you're told you can't bring someone, ask for the reason in writing.

🌿 You have the right to ask questions.

If something doesn't make sense, you can ask.

You don't have to agree with everything said.

You are allowed to challenge things — calmly, respectfully, and firmly.


🌿 You have the right to see minutes and records. You can ask for written notes from meetings, and request corrections if something is inaccurate or missing.

This is part of your record – and your child's.

🌿 You have the right to ask for a break. If you feel overwhelmed, triggered, or need a moment to collect yourself, you can ask to pause the meeting. You are a human being, not a case file.

*🌿 You have the right to request things in writing. If you're being asked to agree to something verbally, you can say:
"Can you put that in writing so I can review it before responding?"*


This gives you time. It gives you clarity. It gives you protection.

 *You have the right to ask for your views to be added to reports.*

If something is written about you that you disagree with,

you can ask for your version of events or concerns to be included alongside it.

This creates a fuller picture.

 *You have the right to be treated with dignity.*

You are allowed to ask to be spoken to with respect.

You are not required to accept being blamed, dismissed, or shamed.

If a meeting becomes unsafe, you can leave.

You can follow up later in writing.

You can explain why you needed to step away.

This system often makes people feel voiceless.

But you are still allowed to speak.

Even if your voice shakes.

Even if they don't agree.

Even if you're tired of saying it all again.

You are still allowed to be heard.

Closing Thoughts:

When the System Forgets Its Purpose

Social services were created with care in mind.

Protection. Support. Human dignity.

But somewhere along the line, the system

became something else —

More paperwork than presence.

More power than partnership.

More pressure than peace.

If you've felt confused, angry, let down, or invisible...

You are not imagining it.

And you are not alone.

This section wasn't written to fuel fear.

It was written to name the gap between
what should happen and what too often does.

So you can stand more steadily in it.

You may not be able to control the system.

But you can learn how to move through it with clarity.

You can reclaim your voice, your story, your strength.

Even in a room full of professionals, you still matter.

Even when they don't listen, your truth still exists.

Even when it feels like you're breaking, you are still holding on.

And that —

That is something they will never be able to measure.

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