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Background

The Children Act 1989 imposes a duty on Local Authorities in England to 'safeguard and promote the welfare of children' and to 'promote the upbringing of children by their families' wherever possible. If, during pregnancy, concerns are identified that suggest the child may be at risk of harm a referral may be made to the Local Authority for a pre-birth assessment. UK Law does not legislate for the rights of the unborn baby. In some circumstances, agencies or individuals are able to anticipate the likelihood of Significant Harm with regard to an expected baby.

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Why it matters

The pan-Lancashire pre-birth protocol has been developed to support agencies and practitioners in their decision making and assessment processes when working with a pregnant woman, her partner and family. The aim of this protocol is to ensure that all unborn babies with additional needs are identified as early as possible and ensure that appropriate and timely services are delivered in an integrated manner to potentially save the life of the unborn baby.

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Information

Research and experience indicate that very young babies are extremely vulnerable and that work carried out in the antenatal period to assess risk and to plan intervention will help to minimise harm. During the ante-natal period all professionals have a responsibility to promote the welfare of the mother and unborn baby.

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Important factors to consider; is it an unwanted pregnancy, concealed or denied pregnancy, a premature birth, are the parents very young, is there lack of or inconsistent ante-natal care or additional/complex health needs (e.g. disability or substance withdrawal.) You may need to consider the parents capacity and their ability to care for the child.

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There may be environmental factors to consider such as domestic abuse, lack of support network, inappropriate living conditions. All professionals should give high priority to attendance at Child Protection Conferences if requested. If attendance is not possible, they should ensure that their report is taken to the conference by another appropriately briefed professional from their agency and any outcomes/actions cascaded back to the family's lead professional or key worker in their own agency.

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What to do Multi-agency support should be coordinated to meet the needs of an unborn child, with parental consent and Early Help. A referral to Children's Social Care (CSC) for a Pre-Birth Assessment must be completed if there is a suspicion that the unborn baby is likely to suffer significant harm. Ensure that you have assessed using a risk sensible approach prior to making a referral to use risk management and reduction rather than risk removal.

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Questions to consider

Are there concerns that parents or close associates may pose a risk to children i.e. previous CSC involvement, criminal activity or abuse of children, or sexual offences, drug/alcohol or mental health issues?

Do you know all people in the home?

Do the parents have children that have been made subject to a Child Protection Plan, or Care Order at any time in the past (or ongoing)?

