The concept of significant harm:

Some children are in need because they are suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm as a result of parental/carer/familial abuse or neglect. The Children Act 1989 introduced the concept of significant harm as the threshold that justifies compulsory intervention in family life in the best interests of children, and gives local authorities a duty to make enquiries to decide whether they should take action to safeguard or promote the welfare of a child who is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm.

There are no absolute criteria on which to rely when judging what constitutes significant harm. Consideration of the severity of ill-treatment may include the degree and the extent of physical harm, the duration and frequency of abuse and neglect, the extent of premeditation, and the presence or degree of threat, coercion, sadism and bizarre or unusual elements. Each of these elements has been associated with more severe effects on the child, and/or relatively greater difficulty in helping the child overcome the adverse impact of the maltreatment. Sometimes, a single traumatic event may constitute significant harm, for example, a violent assault, suffocation or poisoning. More often, significant harm is a compilation of significant events, both acute and long-standing, which interrupt, change or damage the child’s physical and psychological development. Some children live in family and social circumstances where their health and development are neglected. For them, it is the corrosiveness of long-term emotional, physical or sexual abuse that causes impairment to the extent of constituting significant harm. In each case, it is necessary to consider any maltreatment alongside the child’s own assessment of his or her safety and welfare, the family’s strengths and supports, as well as an assessment of the likelihood and capacity for change and improvements in parenting and the care of children and young people.

To understand and identify significant harm, it is necessary to consider:

- the nature of harm, in terms of maltreatment or failure to provide adequate care;
- the impact on the child’s health and development;
- the child’s development within the context of their family and wider environment;
- any special needs, such as a medical condition, communication impairment or disability, that may affect the child’s development and care within the family;
- the capacity of parents to meet adequately the child’s needs; and
- the wider and environmental family context.