**Buckinghamshire County Council**

**Checklist for Children Looked After Returning Home**

**Care Planning Regulations (2015)**

On 6th March 2015, changes made to the Care Planning Regulations (2010) were laid before the parliament and they came into force on 1st April 2015. There were corresponding changes to the statutory guidance and the new guidance “Permanence, long-term foster placements and ceasing to look after a child” was published in March 2015. The new regulations amend the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 with respect to the assessment and planning arrangements where the responsible authority is considering ceasing to look after a child. When making a decision about ceasing to look after a child the local authority must:

* carry out an assessment of the suitability of the proposed arrangements for the child’s accommodation and maintenance
* assess what services and support the child and, where applicable, their parents might need
* ensure that the child’s wishes and feelings have been given due consideration, and
* consider whether, in all the circumstances, ceasing to look after the child will safeguard and promote their welfare.

**Purpose of this checklist:**

In order to achieve good outcomes for children returning home from care the gate-keeping of the exit from care needs to match the quality and vigilance of gate-keeping that guards entry into care.

**What stage in the child’s journey is this to be used?**

This checklist needs to be used at that stage in the child’s journey when consideration is being given to the child returning home. Success is unlikely if the decision for the child to return home is made because *it seems to be the only decision available*. The audit findings tell us that good outcomes for children returning home from care can be achieved if this decision is based on careful planning underpinned by an assessment that looks at the original reasons for the child coming into care, addresses historical issues, analyses current concerns and predicts any likely future issues and risks.

**Who completes the checklist?**

A LAC review needs to be convened when consideration is given for the child to return home. This checklist should be used by the IRO at the time of this LAC review. If in exceptional circumstances the decision needs to be made quickly, such as when parents withdraw their consent to Section 20 and there is no time to convene a LAC Review then this checklist should be completed by the Team Manager and Social Worker in consultation with the IRO.

**Some points to guide our thinking when ceasing to look after a child:**

Are we accepting levels of parental behaviour above the thresholds that brought the child into care?

Do we think that this time somehow things will somehow be better so let’s give it a try?

What does the child want? And what do the parents want?

The NSPCC report suggests the framework below for classifying the risk of reunification

Classifying the risk of reunification - a tool to support decision making about children returning home from care, adapted from Safeguarding Babies and Very Young Children from Abuse and Neglect (Ward Brown and Westlake, 2012)

***Severe Risk***

* *Risk factors apparent and not being addressed, no protective factors apparent*
* *No evidence of parental capacity to change and ambivalence or opposition to return home by child or parent*

***High Risk***

* *Risk factors apparent and not being addressed. At least one protective factor apparent*
* *No or limited evidence of parental capacity to change and ambivalence or opposition to return home by child or parent*

***Medium Risk***

* *Risk factors apparent or not all risk factors addressed. At least one protective factor apparent*
* *Evidence of parental capacity to sustain change. Parents and child both want return home to take place*

***Low Risk***

* *No risk factors apparent or previous risk factors fully addressed and protective factors apparent*
* *Evidence of parental capacity to sustain change. Parents and child both want return home to take place.*

**The Checklist**

* Head of Service agreement with the return home plan is recorded as management oversight case note.
* There is an up to date chronology.
* There is an Updated Assessment that takes into account and analyses:
* Information in the chronology
* The child’s journey and not just the ‘here and now’
* Reasons why the child came into care
* Evidence of change in parenting capacity and parent/s’ capacity to sustain this change
* Involvement of fathers and / or parent’s partner in suitable depth
* Information from relevant partner agencies, including agencies working with adults such as Housing, Mental Health, Probation etc.
* Stresses in the family such as illness, debt, housing, etc.
* The assessment forms the basis of the planning. It is recommended that the planning uses the SOSW model so that all parties have a clear understanding of the dangers / risks, desired outcomes / goals and actions that are required to achieve these. The planning includes the following:
* Participation of the child (takes into account the child’s wishes), family and relevant partner agencies to draw up the plan.
* The plan is agreed and owned by the child, family and relevant partner agencies.
* The plan is clear and everyone involved understands what they need to do to achieve the outcomes.
* There is a robust contingency plan.
* The plan is clearly records how the parental support network is involved and successfully supporting the family whilst the professional network is gradually withdrawing.
* There is a transition plan from leaving care and returning home.
* The case is not closed immediately after the child returns home and there is a phased withdrawal of professional support.
* Direct work continues with children after returning home. In cases where the concern is about parental mental health, domestic violence or substance misuse the direct work includes helping children understand the concern, identify warning signs and have appropriate strategies of what to do if they see these signs (safety plans). In cases of parental mental ill-health the direct work is aimed at helping children deal with worries about their own potential for mental ill-health. This work can be carried out by a mentor or young carer’s project but they may need support and insights from relevant partner agencies.
* Life story work is completed with children who have been in care for over a year and they have a later life letter from their social worker.
* All relevant agencies, including GP, Housing, Adult Mental Health (if relevant) are informed that the child is returning home and the plan is shared with them.
* All significant documents, including court documents are uploaded on the child’s record.
* Children (and parents) are informed of their rights as eligible / relevant and former relevant children and their right to access their records.
* Children are given their health passport and savings for the duration they were in care.