**Planned and Unplanned Return Home Protocol for Children in Care under S20:**

We firmly believe that children are best placed living within their own family or family networks wherever this is possible and it’s safe for them to do so. This fits with our Better Together framework and we aim to work together with families to explore and offer support or services, internal and community based, that can assist them and their children to achieve this. There are times however when this isn’t possible, and in those situations we strive to work with families and children for any child’s care experience to be planned following a robust assessment and offer of support, such as a Family Group Conference (FGC), involvement of Edge of Care (EOC), Exploitation Team, Early Help services, other community-based services, and use of pre-proceedings or Public Law Outline (PLO) processes so that there can be a smooth transition from home to care if this is achievable. In those situations where a child comes into care as the result of a crisis or emergency meaning that pre-planning can’t take place, then those processes should still follow immediately afterwards.

In the same way that we try to receive children into care in a planned and considered way where that is appropriate for them, then the aim should be to achieve a planned ending to a placement with careful preparation and a planned transition where possible, ensuring that the views of the child, parents or others with Parental Responsibility (PR), any other significant person in the child’s life, and the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) is taken into consideration and reflected in those plans.

For those children who are subject to an Interim Care Order (ICO) or Care Order (CO) under sections 38 and 31 of the Children Act 1989 respectively, the planning of the reunification of the child to their family home or the care of another significant person will take place and be agreed within the court arena and oversight of the Director through signing off of Schedule 3 reports, and the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) authorisation of final court care plans, and is therefore not the focus of this protocol.

We believe however that it is equally important that this same diligence is paid to children being cared for under S20 of the Children Act 1989. Social workers are reminded of the importance of being mindful of the rights of parents, others with PR, and the rights of children 16 and older to make their own decisions independent of their parents/adult with PR, as well as ensuring that we make them aware of these rights and work respectfully with them. ***Please see the separate guidance on use of S20 when accommodating children.***

***Planned return home - Reunification***

Tower Hamlets reunification framework has been developed and based on the principles of the NSPCC reunification model - an evidenced, informed framework for return home (2015), which fits well with our Better Together framework. Our reunification framework and the work of the Edge of Care team has strong links to our restorative practice approach including the use of Family Group Conferences at various stages of the assessment and planning processes. This also includes the involvement and connection with the Lifelong Links team which aims to build positive, lasting support networks for children and young people and requires the network to identify a trusted adult for the child or young person to have an established connection with.

The NSPCC framework is a decision-making process. It is about assessing whether it is safe enough for a return home to happen or to identify what support is needed to make it safe enough for a young person to return home and remain at home and avoid another return to care. The Edge of Care Service can help the social work team in this work with children 8 - 17. The service is guided to use the steps of the NSPCC Evidence-informed framework for return home practice work where the steps of the model are followed. The framework supports practitioners and managers to apply professional judgment to complex decisions about whether a child should return home. If Edge of Care is not involved with the family, consultation can be offered to the social work teams around return home planning.

If reunification work is completed, evidence of an analytical chronology, themes and patterns document, the risk classification meeting, and a co-produced return home plan informed by the NSPCC model are all completed and uploaded in documents in the child’s record. The social worker is then required to complete an updated assessment to consider a return home decision.

The Edge of Care Team can also support a family in a planned return home when support is offered but the NSPCC framework is not completed. This is when a decision is already agreed for a child or young person to return home, but the offer of intensive support is required to help support and sustain the outcome of return home. Planned return home process can take up to 16 weeks to complete and therefore referrals to the Edge of Care team need to take this into consideration when case planning.

[Flowchart Planned Return Home using NSPCC reunification framework stage 1 and 2 only (003).docx](https://towerhamlets2-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/shirley_quashie-dunne_towerhamlets_gov_uk/Eajn_V-cOgFKntldxNQyxLcBuI2jAYxgOyu52uAgdB2oLQ?e=v5Yym9)

***Unplanned return home***

However, for those children who have been in care for at least 20 days, when this is not possible either because the child chooses to leave care or return home in an unplanned way or where their parents have withdrawn their S20 agreement before plans for reunification or an agreed transition can be put in place, meaning the placement ends suddenly or in an unplanned way, the expectation is that the statutory guidance for ‘Ceasing to look after a child’ in the [**Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations (2015)**](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/441643/Children_Act_Guidance_2015.pdf#page=125) as amended by the 'Care Planning and Fostering (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2015' and The Children and Social Work Act 2017, together with [**Working Together to Safeguard Children**](http://www.workingtogetheronline.co.uk/) will be followed.

The guidance states that the **“Local Authority has a duty to ensure that when children have been**

**Accommodated under Section 20 (Children Act 1989) and are discharged from, or leave care, that the discharge is in their best interests and that they will be safeguarded, and their welfare will be promoted. Where a child has been Accommodated for 20 days or more, the decision should be made by a Nominated Officer, or Director of Children's Services if the child/young person is 16/17 years and has been Accommodated under Section 20, before discharge”**.

Although the guidance relates to children aged 16 and 17, in Tower Hamlets (TH) it will also apply to all children we care for under S20 who have been in our care for 20 days or more choosing to leave our care or where their parent/person with PR withdraws their consent for them to continue to be cared for by TH. To fulfil our responsibility of ensuring that the return home or decision to end their care status is in their best interests and/or that they are safeguarded and their welfare promoted where their return home is felt to be premature by the Local Authority, an updated assessment with an analysis of any potential risks, proposed safety plan, and/or stepdown plan will be completed and agreed by the team manager, relevant Head of Service, and have the view of the IRO included before being signed off by the Director of Supporting Families before the formal ending of their care episode. The completed form should then be uploaded into the child’s record once signed off by the Director. This work should be completed even if the child has already returned home and also in those situations where a child has been in care for less than 20 days but may have had another short episode of care within the previous three months to ensure that appropriate thought has been given to the stepdown plan and offer of appropriate services to support the child remaining at home and reduce the possibility of another return to care.

For children who have been cared for three months or less, the initial Child & Family Reassessment form (this has now replaced the single assessment form) or newly created S20 return home assessment form can be presented which should give a short analysis of the circumstances leading to the child’s decision to end their care experience, the parent/s decision to withdraw their S20 agreement, together with any risks identified and supports or services recommended, or referrals made as part of the step-down plan including CIN (child in need) meetings, FGC (Family Group Conference), Edge of Care, Exploitation team, Early Help, Youth Justice, community based resources etc. This assessment and stepdown plan must be agreed with the relevant Head of Service before presenting to the Director of Supporting Families, Susannah Beasley Murray, for sign off and ending of the child’s care status on Mosaic even if agreement has previously been given by the Head of Service for the placement to be closed in those situations where children have returned home before the updated assessments, safety planning, and sign off has taken place. For children who have been cared for over three months, an updated Child & Family Reassessment form should be completed and should include an analysis of any potential risk and proposed safety or stepdown plan as described above.

Social workers must also ensure that due consideration is given to children’s wishes about remaining in or leaving care is heard and that their voices are reflected in assessments, care plans, and any other documents produced to inform the decision around continuing their status as a child in care where it is contrary to what their parent may want if they are over 16, or to end it if they are 16 and over, or if it is their parent/s expressed wish for children under 16. In all circumstances the views of parent/s or others with PR must be considered and informed about all decisions made about their child. In line with the IRO Handbook, social workers must also inform the child’s IRO about any planned or potential unplanned ending of their care status so that they can decide whether it is appropriate to call an early review and consult with the child in relation to this.

Regardless of whether it is a planned or unplanned return home, a social work visit should take place within the first three days of the child returning home, and then a weekly check-in for the next four weeks at a minimum. The basis and form of the check-in will depend on the child’s circumstances, which other professionals, services, or community resources might be involved, and the level of risk identified at the point the child returned home. The safety or stepdown plan should contain what on-going contact or visit requirement is suggested or has been agreed beyond this by the child and/or parent where appropriate.

The home the child is living in, whether that is a foster placement or children’s home/residential home, should not be ended without the consent of the social worker’s relevant Head of Service regardless of whether the child is staying there or not, and it will remain open until the written confirmation/agreement from the Head of Service is sent to the Children’s Placement Team (CPT) and recorded on the child’s record either in case notes or uploaded email, when foster carers or other service providers will be informed with a specified end date. The Director’s formal agreement to the ending of the child’s care status should also be uploaded onto the child’s record. Agencies or professionals involved with the child, or their family should be informed of the ending of the care episode and any support or safety plan that has been put in place.

No matter how brief their experience of being in our care is, it is important for children to understand why they were in our care, what happened while they were in our care, and the decisions we made for them should they ever be curious enough later in their life to come back and try to make sense of that time of their life. Social workers will therefore be expected to write a short “Your time in our care” letter to help them understand and make sense of this. IRO’s, foster carers, and key workers can also be asked to contribute to this as well as statements from parents so that it is a document that they will feel comfortable sharing or talking about with their child.

**Linked documents for further information:**

[Protocol for Planned and Unplanned Reunification February 24.docx](https://towerhamlets2-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/shirley_quashie-dunne_towerhamlets_gov_uk/EVge1C5k8XROtW0BPGtDITUBohhhhYJEFNBCLU8AngH7bA?e=aZ1dCR)

[S20 Unplanned Return Home Flowchart v3 (002).docx](https://towerhamlets2-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/shirley_quashie-dunne_towerhamlets_gov_uk/Ec5pGIJGSoFAvhrI4ymePeEBbGZS6Il4I6Ics_lQcX81Qw?e=jxMMou)

[Reunification One Minute Guide.docx](https://towerhamlets2-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/shirley_quashie-dunne_towerhamlets_gov_uk/ERjged3d14lKsmaA4BeVQ9sBRsJCDgkgN1erq41KoXM52A?e=gFxNFE)

[Flowchart Planned Return Home using NSPCC reunification framework stage 1 and 2 only (003).docx](https://towerhamlets2-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/shirley_quashie-dunne_towerhamlets_gov_uk/Eajn_V-cOgFKntldxNQyxLcBuI2jAYxgOyu52uAgdB2oLQ?e=rRd7kL)

[Director's retrospective agreement to S20 child returning home.docx](https://towerhamlets2-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/shirley_quashie-dunne_towerhamlets_gov_uk/ERByEX-FNlBOqViaQheMP6oBr3WQdma2uEVQfSmagRZ-6Q?e=ler0M9)

[S20 Return home assessment form.docx](https://towerhamlets2-my.sharepoint.com/:w:/g/personal/shirley_quashie-dunne_towerhamlets_gov_uk/Eem3jk_cCNlHrZDclnGzNX8Bi-bwxa9HoTkBAeF6B586jQ?e=wk9XuJ)