

**Best Practice Guidance for**

**Reunification of Children from Care of birth parents**

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1. **Introduction**

This is guidance forSocial Workers, Advance Practitioners, Team Managers, contact workers and Supervising Social Workers supporting fostering households about the best practice regarding children who are being returned to home after a period in Local Authority Care.

Children in care can have varied experiences of being in care outside of their birth families. Some have settled experiences, with minimal moves and carers who are able to understand and adapt to their changing needs. Some have very disruptive experiences which leave them feeling unstable, impacting on their emotional well-being and sense of belonging.

Whether the Child/Young Person has a settled or unsettled experience in foster care, the majority of children would wish that they were able to live with their birth family. Thus there is always the possibility that at some stage (usually in their adolescence) the child may want this option to be considered for them.

This guidance will seek to provide clarity as to best practice guidance around the process for returning children home, both for those who are in care for a long or short period of time.

Best Practice dictates that every child’s care plan should be reviewed every six months as part of the statutory requirements on Local Authorities. Best Practice also dictates that the option to return home should be explored in those cases where parents have made changes which may enable them to now offer better, more stable care for their child.

Thus there is an expectation that the Local Authority should evidence that thought has been given to this throughout the child’s journey through care, and not just when placements are breaking down, or when parents make applications to court to discharge orders, or when children gravitate back to their parents care on their own volition.

What is key in all of those scenarios is ensuring that thorough and timely assessments are conducted and support is identified to enable a transition home that will last for the remainder of that child’s minority.

1. **What Research Tells Us:**

***SOURCE:******NSPCC Returning children home from care: learning from case reviews***

*Summary of risk factors and learning for improved practice for reunification*

***October 2015***

NSPCC commissioned research with the University of Bristol to consider best practice for successful reunifications. They reviewed key issues identified from case reviews where reunification plans had been unsuccessful and/or resulted in significant risk/harm to the child/young person. The findings for the unsuccessful reunifications were as follows:

* **Delay or lack of assessment before deciding to return a child home**

Children were returned to the care of their families without a thorough risk assessment. Where assessments did take place they often did not involve the whole family. For example new partners and siblings were not involved in assessments.

When assessments were made there was sometimes a significant delay in writing them up, meaning that decisions were made on the basis of verbal reports rather than a full outline of available information. In other cases, not all the relevant agencies were involved. In particular, adult services, who often held important information about parents' capacity to care for their children, were not represented. A lack of thorough, timely assessments meant that family's support needs post reunification were not identified or provided for.

* **Lack of understanding about a parent’s capacity to change**

Children were often returned home despite there being little sign of improvement. This was particularly true in cases when there were ongoing issues with child neglect. Professionals saw parents as needing a break rather than recognising neglect as an ongoing problem with a cumulative impact on the child.

* **Acting on children’s expressed wishes without considering the potential risks involved**

In some cases professionals took on face value children’s expressed desire to return home. There was a failure to take into consideration the potential impact of parental pressure on what young people were saying.

In cases involving adolescents, some professionals decided it was unrealistic to prevent them from returning to their families regardless of how harmful it was. In particular, when adolescents repeatedly ran from care back to their birth family, there seemed to be a perception that care decisions couldn’t be enforced. In one case a failure to return a child to care after they ran home to their birth family set a precedent resulting in the disruption of other siblings’ care placements.

* **Lack of use or understanding of legal powers**

Professionals often believed they had no power to prevent a child returning to a harmful home environment if the child had originally been taken in to care voluntarily.

In some cases the child was returned home after parents signed a written agreement outlining what was expected of them and the support they would receive. These agreements did not outline what would happen if conditions were not adhered to and there was no response when parents did not fulfil these expectations.

* **Professional optimism**

In a number of cases one parent was recognised as the sole source of risk to their child. Once the risk was removed following imprisonment of the risky parent or parental separation, the child was returned to the “safe” parent without a proper assessment of their own capacity to care for their child.

* **Information sharing**

Agencies working with children and their families were not always informed when care was transferred to or from parents. Information about changes in the family’s situation wasn’t always integrated into parenting assessments and care planning meetings. Key agencies were sometimes missing from planning meetings leaving professionals unable to build a full picture of the family’s situation.

Particular issues arose when care placements were in different local authorities or countries to the birth families. Problems around cross-border communication meant that information was lost about the child’s vulnerabilities and the parents’ capacity to care for them.

* **Lack of observation/monitoring**

In a number of cases children were temporarily taken into care because their parents were struggling with a particular issue. When this issue was addressed, children were returned home. However there was no system in place to monitor whether parents continued to engage with support services or the impact a future lack of engagement would have on their children.

* **Lack of planning and support during and after the process of returning a child home**

External time pressures were allowed to dictate the timing of returns home. For example one child returned home quickly because their social worker wanted to get them settled before the start of the new school year. In one case, despite the parent not having parental responsibility, children were allowed to stay overnight with them because it was Christmas. In a number of cases agency support was withdrawn shortly after children ceased to have looked after status. Contingency plans were not put in place at the point of withdrawal of local authority support.

**Based on these findings the NSPCC recommendations are as follows:**

* **Making a Thorough assessment**

Before making the decision to return a child home from care there should be a thorough assessment of:

• potential risks and protective factors

• parenting capacity and capacity to change

• on-going support needs.

Assessments should also consider the child's wants and needs and the impact their early experiences have had on them. Assessments should be based on a thorough understanding of the birth family including a knowledge of family history and any changes to family dynamics, for example new partners or siblings.

* **Clear conditions for return of child**

Parents need to know what is expected of them if their child is returned. They should know what support and help they will receive. It should be made clear what will happen if they fail to provide an acceptable level of care. This should all be set out in a written agreement.

* **Preparation for and staged return of the child**

A transition period should be provided to allow both the child and carer to adjust to the move home. This should include a period of increased contact so professionals can monitor how the parents cope with the pressure of assuming more responsibility for caring for their child. Returning a child to their birth family shouldn't automatically result in the closure of a case. All children returning home from care should be considered Children in Need for a suitable period of time following a return home.

* **Sharing information and working with professionals in other agencies**

Care review and planning meetings should involve all agencies who work directly with the child or their family.

* **Good monitoring of the child before, during and after the return**

All agencies that work with a family need to recognise that family situations change and parents who have previously struggled may struggle again. Their progress needs to be monitored and support provided as the need arises.

* **Financial Support**

It is not uncommon for families to require financial assistance to support and facilitate a child back into their family. Parents should be encouraged to apply for their benefit entitlements as soon as possible; ensure that they have support to do this correctly as part of the transition plan.

The following would be appropriate costs to budget for:

 Furniture/Equipment for the child

 New Bedding

 Travel costs for increased contact

Costs for meals – parents should be encouraged to prepare food for their contacts; this can be incorporated as part of their parenting assessment

**When first transitioned home financial subsistence may be required and is calculated as follows:**

*DWP Rates correct as of 01.10.2019*

Weekly Child Benefit entitlement £20.70

Child Tax Credit is paid Per Annum at £545 (Family Element) + £2780 = £3325

This is then calculated per week as £69.25 (+£20.70)

Total Weekly subsistence **£89.95**

*Child Tax Credit for child with disability £3355p.a. pw £81.25 (+£20.70) =****£101.95***

It may also be appropriate to offer Summer and Winter Clothing Allowance and initial clothing/school uniform allowance. *This is calculated at the fostering rates as follows*:

New Primary School Uniform £100

New Secondary School Uniform £200

Initial clothing allowance £100

(if it is assessed that child/YP needs new clothes)

Winter/Summer Clothing Allowance £50

1. **How do we assess parenting capacity?**

Before discussions and plans for reunification progress the assessment of the parent (informed by the Assessment Framework for Children and Families) should include explorations of the following:

* What changes the parent(s) have made and how long have they sustained the changes? Is there evidence of their motivation for things to be different?
* Is there evidence from other professionals to support what the parent is telling you? i.e. engagement in Mental Health services, substance misuse services, evidence of greater stability with housing, in employment, support network?
* What is the evidence that the parent(s) understand the past and current concerns?
* Does the parent recognise the possible challenges and difficulties they could experience? What are their views for how they will respond and manage these challenges? Are they able to work in partnership with the Local Authority? Will they accept help?
* What is the current relationship between the child and parent? What are the strengths in relation to the parents? Do they have a true sense of the child? Are their expectations realistic?
* Can the parent implement clear boundaries and expectations? What would the parent do if they were struggling to manage behaviours?
* What is likely to impact on a successful reunification plan? What support is required before, during and after reunification has occurred?
* What is the identified support plan – what could be some of the financial expectations, i.e. housing, furniture, transport costs etc.

Holding a FGC as early as possible is important to identify the key support both during the transition and afterwards. The assessment should also involve observations of them with the child. Observations of the relationship are essential to developing the understanding of how the family is likely to function, but also for identification for interventions and support which would assist with the problematic elements of the reunification. This should include observations in the home environment wherever possible.

1. **How do we prepare the child**

The child’s wishes and feelings about a reunification plan should be considered and evaluated as part of the assessment. Where some children may be eager to return home as soon as possible, others may be anxious and worried about whether things have genuinely changed.

Direct work and regular conversations with the child should explore the thoughts and feelings that may be on their mind. It is essential to include the professional network to work together and support the child during this process.

The role of the carer (foster carer/residential key worker) is essential to the process. Not only in respect of gauging the wishes and feelings of the child/Young Person, but also in developing the plan for returning home. The support of the carer will assist with a smoother transition.

The IRO should speak to the child to ascertain their wishes and feelings, and consider the assessment before plans are made. The IRO should be consulted and should consider if it is appropriate to reconvene the LAC review. Families Together Team can offer support for the transition home also therefore early referral for their involvement should be made.

Below is a link to some helpful worksheets you could use or adapt to facilitating direct work with the child/YP:

[**http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/say-way-40-worksheets-facilitating-childrens-participation-assessment/**](http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/say-way-40-worksheets-facilitating-childrens-participation-assessment/)

1. **How long rehab transition should take**

The role of supervised, supported contact is imperative to planning, observing and reviewing the parent/child relationship as well as offering a safe place to start introducing more time for the family to spend time together.

Being creative about how to create as many “real life” situations to observe the parent and child within will provide the best opportunity to gain a sense of what is likely to work well and what further support would be required. Talk to the contact service about how they can assist with the observations of contact. If there are any barriers to the support coming wholly from the in-house service, make enquiries from PKS (Pottons Kare Service) to identify someone who can consistently support and observe contacts.

Ideally, the transition should involve the least amount of disruption for the Child/YP, i.e. avoiding unnecessary changes to education provision. However, if significant changes such as school placement are unavoidable then this should be incorporated in the plan accordingly. It is also beneficial to undertake transitions, increasing contact when there are school holidays.

Below is an example of what a good transition plan should look like (this may be suited to a child aged 4+):

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Monday** | **Tuesday** | **Wednesday** | **Thursday** | **Friday** | **Saturday** | **Sunday** |
| 10am – 12pm Supervised contact between Billy and Mum at Collier Row CC | 10am – 1pm Supervised contact between Billy and Mum at Collier Row CC | 10am – 1pm Partly supervised contact between Billy and mum at Collier Row CC | 10am – 1pm Partly supervised contact between Billy and mum at Collier Row CC | 10am – 1pm Partly supervised contact between Billy and mum at Collier Row CCSW to attend towards end of contact to observe | 10am – 2pm Partly supervised community contact between Billy and mum; venue TBC | Rest day |
| **Monday** | **Tuesday** | **Wednesday** | **Thursday** | **Friday** | **Saturday** | **Sunday** |
| 10am – 2pm Partly supervised community contact between Billy and mum; venue TBC | 10am – 2pm Partly supervised community contact between Billy and mum; venue TBC | 10am Review meeting with mum, Billy, contact SV, FC and SWFollowed by partly supervised community contact | 10am – 2pm Supervised contact between Billy and mum; at home; SW to be present for 2 hours | 10am – 2pm Supervised contact between Billy and mum at home | 9am – 3pm Partly supervised contact between Billy and mum at home and in community | Rest Day |
| **Monday** | **Tuesday** | **Wednesday** | **Thursday** | **Friday** | **Saturday** | **Sunday** |
| 8am Mum to collect Billy from FC and take him to school.3.15pm – 6.30pm Mum to collect Billy from school; Partly supervised contact between Billy and mum at home after school | 8am Mum to collect Billy from FC and take him to school.3.15pm – 6.30pm Mum to collect Billy from school; Partly supervised contact between Billy and mum at home after school | 8am Mum to collect Billy from FC and take him to school.10am review meeting with mum, contact SV, FC and SW; FC to bring bulk of Billy’s belongings3.15pm – **overnight** Mum to collect Billy from school; Partly supervised contact between Billy and mum at home after school | 8am Mum to drop Billy to school 3.15pm – 6.30pm Mum to collect Billy from school; Unsupervised contact between Billy and mum at home after school | 8am Mum collect Billy from FC and take him to school. 3.15pm – **overnight** Mum to collect Billy from school; Partly supervised contact between Billy and mum at home after school; SW to visit | 12pm Mum to return Billy to FC | **Rest day – Billy to have farewell with Foster family** |
| **Monday** | **Tuesday** | **Wednesday** | **Thursday** | **Friday** | **Saturday** | **Sunday** |
| 8am FC to take Billy to school; 10am review meeting with IRO, mum, contact SV, FC and SW; FC to bring rest of Billy’s belongings3.15pm – 6.30pm Mum to collect Billy from school; Unsupervised contact between Billy and mum at home after school | Move DayMum to collect Billy from school; SW to be present for Billy and mother arrival home from school run. | Unannounced visit | Unannounced visit | Unannounced visit | Unannounced visit | Unannounced visit |

1. **What orders the transition can be progressed under, ICO/ISO/CAO**

Ensure senior management is aware of the plan for returning home, it may be appropriate for the case to be presented to Case Consultation and/or Legal Planning. The Independent Reviewing Officer should be kept informed and involved with the decision making.

For a child on an Interim Care Order or Full Care Order, the Social Worker must complete the Placement with Parents paperwork which must be signed off by the Assistant Director.

A written agreement setting out the expectations should be prepared and reviewed with a parent well ahead of the child moving.

1. **What happens if rehabilitation is not successful**

There sadly are occasions where return home is not successful. As identified earlier in this document, there are things that we can do to lessen the likelihood of this happening, however in those circumstances where it is unavoidable it is essential to act sensitively to try to minimise the impact of loss and separation for the child/YP but also try to preserve the relationship with the parent(s).

Wherever possible, the child/YP should be placed with a carer/placement they have been before.

Direct work/therapeutic support is important in gaining the views and feelings of the child/YP. Helping them to make sense of what has happened. This is also beneficial for the parent.

A “disruptions meeting” is required for the professional network to explore the reasons why the return home wasn’t successful and if there had been anyway to avoid that from happening.

Resources:

1. ***Returning children home from care: learning from case reviews****; Summary of risk factors and learning for improved practice for reunification;* ***Oct 2015; NSPCC***
2. ***Improving Practice in Respect of Children who return home from care;*** *Research Report****; Dec 2015; DfE, National Children’s Bureau and Centre for Child and Family Research, Loughborough University***
3. **‘Say it your own way’ Children’s Participation in Assessment:** Resources; **Barnados and Dept of Education and Skills**
4. **Direct work tools:** [**http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/say-way-40-worksheets-facilitating-childrens-participation-assessment/**](http://www.socialworkerstoolbox.com/say-way-40-worksheets-facilitating-childrens-participation-assessment/)

**Appendix**

**Placement with a Parent/s Placement Agreement**

This Placement Agreement should be completed when a Child under the age of 18 who is subject of an Interim/Full Care Order, is placed with a parent/s for any time period over 24 hours.

Each participant must be given a copy of the completed Agreement prior to a placement commencing (even for an overnight stay). .

This form should be discussed with and endorsed by the Head of Service/Service Manager, prior to a placement being made.

1. **Contract Agreement:**

**Part I : Key Details**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Child’s Name: |  |
| Date of Birth:  |  |
| Gender:  |  |
| Ethnicity:  |  |
| First Language:  |  |
| Legal Status:  |  |
| Parent’s Name and Address |  |
| Placing Agency: |  |
| Primary Carer in Current Care Placement:  |  |
| Person/s with Parents Responsibility:  |  |
| Address:   |  |
| Telephone Number:  |  |
| Date the Placement is to Start:  |  |
| Social worker:  |  |
| Team Manager:  |  |
| Agency Address:   |  |
| Telephone Number:  |  |

1. **Reasons for Care Order**
2. **Objectives of the Placement**

*What objective(s) will everyone work towards? The objective(s) must be one{s) that the participants agree can BE ACHIEVED AND WHERE PROGRESS CAN BE MEASURED. If this objective is part of a long-term plan (e.g. short stays at home with eventual goal to live at home full-time and discharge care or order) then please state this. Keep objectives simple and clear and give priority to them.*

1. **Rehabilitation plan:**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Objective** | **How Objective will be met** | **Who will meet it** | **Timescales** |
| **Education** |  |  |  |  |
| **Health** |  |  |  |  |
| **Placement** |  |  |  |  |
| **Leisure** |  |  |  |  |
| **Social and cultural Issues** |  |  |  |  |
| **Financial support** |  |  |  |  |

1. **Frequency and purpose of Social Work and other Agency Contact**
2. **Review Process/Progress**

*When and how will progress towards the objective(s) be reviewed? Will there be a number of reviews before the time limited noted in (17). How will these fit in with the statutory review requirements (s26) and any child protection reviews?*

1. **Contingency**

*What are the plans for the child if the objective(s) is/are not achievable? Give a broad indication of contingency plan, and/or state clearly that changes to this agreement will not be made before full discussion with at least the participants to this agreement.*

1. **Financial Arrangements**

*What financial arrangements have been made for the plan to work?*

**Part II: Parents Obligations**

We (I) the Parent/s of ……………………….(the child/s) , agree as follows:-

1. To work with the Local Authority and other Agencies/Professionals, as set out in Part I of this Placement Agreement.

2. To participate in the Local Authority’s review of the aforementioned child’s welfare and progress, including their health, physical, emotional, educational and social development.

3. To notify the Local Authority of any relevant change of circumstances in relation to where the aforementioned child is placed, including any intention to move the child to another address, changes in the household in which the child will live and any serious occurrence involving injury or death.

4. To comply with any relevant arrangements for medical examination or provision of treatment as deemed appropriate by the Local Authority.

5. To comply with any relevant arrangements for contact

6. To seek the approval of the Local Authority, on not less than 5 days notice, before allowing the aforementioned child to have unsupervised contact with any person who is not otherwise authorised by the Local Authority.

7. To notify the child’s Social worker, or the Duty Social worker if there are any problems, or if you wish to change any aspect of this Agreement.

**Consent:**

I consent to the above agreement and understand that it will remain in force as long as the aforementioned child remains placed in my care, or until she reaches the age of 18 years, unless before that date, the Order committing the aforementioned child to the Care of the Local Authority is revoked, or at termination of placement. This Agreement may be varied only by further agreement between me and the Local Authority.

Signed ……………………………………….. Date …………………………

 (Mother)

 ………………………………………. Date …………………………

 (Young Person)

 ………………………………………. Date …………………………

 (Social worker)

**Part III: Local Authority’s Obligations**

I, ………………………………….. authorised social worker on behalf of London Borough of Havering which shares parental responsibility for ……………………(child), agree and undertake as follows:

1. Not to remove the aforementioned child save that:-

a. If it appears to the Local Authority that the placement is no longer consistent with the Authority’s duty to safeguard and promote the child’s welfare or that it prejudices the safety of the child, the Local Authority shall decide to terminate the placement and remove the child forthwith.

b. In all other circumstances, having decided to terminate the placement the Local Authority will give reasonable notice of this fact to the parents before termination of the placement and removal of the child. This should be sufficient to enable the parent/s to instruct a solicitor.

2. To provide the services and support to the family as outlined in Part I of this Agreement.

NOTE

This agreement will remain in force for as long as the aforementioned child remains placed with her/his parent/s (subject to review) or until she/he attains the age of eighteen years, unless before that date the Order committing the child to the care of the Local Authority is revoked, or at termination of placement. This agreement may be varied by further agreement between parent/s and the Local Authority.

Signed: …………………………………………… Date: ……………

 Social worker

Signed: …………………………………………... Date……………..

 Team Manager

Counter-signed: ………………………………………….. Date: ……………

 Mother

Counter-signed: ………………………………………….. Date: ……………

 Father

Counter-signed: ………………………………………….. Date: ……………

 Young person (if applicable)

Counter-signed: ………………………………………… Date……………...

 other

I agree/do not agree to the Contract Agreement above:

…………………………………………………………………. Date:……………

(Head of Service/Service Manager, on behalf of the Director of CSD)