**Guidance for social workers, managers and IROs regarding**

1. **holding annual review meetings for children placed in agreed long term foster placements**
2. **reducing the frequency of statutory visits for children placed in agreed long term foster placements**

Context:

This guidance is written to ensure any changes to reviewing or visiting patterns are made with the impact on the child being at the heart of decision making. Changes should only be made to enhance the child’s experience of being looked after. This guidance is not intended for any children who are placed in residential care.

1. **Practice Guidance regarding the decision about frequency of review meetings for children in agreed long term foster placements:**

**GUIDANCE IN BRIEF:**

* **It may be appropriate to consider reducing review meetings to once a year (with less formal reviews held inbetween) where children are in matched long term fostering situations and have been living with their carers for more than 12 months.**
* **No young person should have the frequency of their review meetings reduced unless they have been matched to their long term foster carers following the recommendation of the Gloucestershire Foster Panel.**
* **Before agreeing a reduction in the frequency of review meetings for a particular child the social worker should discuss with the IRO. The social worker should gain the agreement of their line manager and the IRO should gain the agreement of their line manager.**
* **It is not appropriate to reduce the frequency of review meetings to once a year in the following situations:**

1. *Where there are or have been any identified child protection concerns in the previous twelve months.*
2. *Where there are or have been any concerns about the stability of the placement in the previous twelve months.*
3. *Where the young person has had their sixteenth birthday and is subject to the pathway planning process.*
4. *Where the young person wants a review meeting every six months*.

* **A decision to hold annual review meetings must be recorded on file and should be reviewed as part of future review meetings**.
* **IROs should follow the process (a-j below) when holding reviews that take place between annual review meetings.**

Relevant Information:

The revised 2015 Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 statutory guidance includes clear instructions as to how to identify that a child is living in a long term foster placement, and these are interpreted as follows:

1. The plan for permanence (recorded in the child’s written care plan) clearly states “long term foster care (intended to last until 18, no return home anticipated)” and there is no ambiguity or contradiction of this intention in the detail of the plan.
2. The local authority has assessed the ability of the identified long-term foster carers to care for the child (through the production of a matching report) and has followed the process to consider the capacity of the carer to meet the needs of the child now and in the future (the matching process),
3. The foster carer fully understands and has explicitly agreed to act as the child’s long term carer at least until the child ceases to be looked-after and this is recorded as part of the assessment process in 2. above,
4. The responsible authority has presented the proposed match for consideration by the local authority foster panel and after the panel’s agreement confirmed the arrangement with the foster carer(s), the birth parents and the child.
5. A record of the agreement from the foster panel must be recorded on the child’s file.
6. The decision to place a child in a long term foster placement with a particular foster carer should be discussed and recorded as part of the review process and the decision should then be recorded in the placement plan.
7. The child has moved to and is living with the long term foster carers.

**All of these actions need to have taken place to be able to say that a young person is living in an agreed long term foster placement. If any of these actions have not taken place then the omissions need to be addressed before a long term foster placement can be confirmed.**

In situations where there is an agreed permanence plan for long term foster care (as in 1 above) and the current carer and the child want the foster placement to be the long-term foster placement, the responsible authority should consider this in a reasonable timescale, following the process from 2. to 5. above (taking into account the existing relationship between the child and the foster carer, the length of time in placement, the child’s relationship with the foster carer’s wider family and community and the progress the child has made in the placement, recorded through the case review process).

There may be circumstances where the responsible authority would not consider it appropriate to assess the ability of the current foster carer as the long-term carer for the child. In these instances the responsible authority should clearly set out the reasons for this decision in writing to the foster carer and also communicate this decision to the child, where it is appropriate to their age and understanding.

In Gloucestershire, children aged 14 and over are not routinely matched with long term foster carers. However, where a social worker identifies that it would be beneficial for a child aged 14 plus to be matched with their long term foster carer there is no reason that this should not be done following steps (1-6) above.

Paragraph 4.17 of the amended Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 says, “Where a child is placed in a long term foster placement from more than a year, consideration should be given to whether it is necessary to hold a meeting as part of each review.”

Paragraph 4.18 says, “The social worker should consult with the IRO and the child (where appropriate to age and understanding) in reaching a decision about holding a meeting. The consultation, information gathering and review process will continue on a six monthly cycle. In circumstances where is it agreed that a meeting will not be held as part of every review, a meeting should be held at least once a year. The factors leading to a decision to hold review meetings on a less frequent basis should be recorded in the child’s care plan.

Paragraph 4.31 says, “Where the decision has been taken that the review process will not include a meeting, the IRO must ensure that full consultation with all relevant individuals, including the child, has taken place to inform the review of the child’s case”.

There is an additional requirement that the review record reflect the review process for a long term foster placement where a meeting did not take place.

The following guidance about frequency of review meetings for children in long term foster placements should be followed for all children and young people looked after by Gloucestershire County Council.

1. No child should be considered for annual review meetings unless the steps (1-6) recorded in the relevant information section above have been completed and the child has been living with the carers for more than one year.
2. The following circumstances require that social workers and IROs must hold six monthly review meetings – regardless of the fact that the child is placed in a long term foster placement for over one year:

* Where there are or have been any identified child protection concerns in the previous twelve months.
* Where there are or have been any concerns about the stability of the placement in the previous twelve months.
* Where the young person has had their sixteenth birthday and is subject to the pathway planning process.
* Where the young person wants a review meeting every six months.

1. Where the IRO has agreed with a social worker that an annual meeting is appropriate for a particular child the IRO and the social worker must both raise this with their line managers. The agreement of both line managers is necessary before any agreement is made with a child that review meetings will be held annually.
2. The decision to hold annual meetings must be recorded on the child’s case file as a separate case note (to include the decision reached and the reasons for the decision). The IRO manager is responsible for recording this decision.
3. The decision to hold review meetings annually must be reconsidered by the social worker and IRO for each review and a record of that communication must be recorded on the child’s file. The IRO is responsible for recording this decision.

**The process for holding and recording six monthly reviews (where a formal meeting does not take place):**

Where it has been agreed between the social worker, the IRO and the child that formal review meetings will be held annually the requirement to hold six monthly reviews remains – but every other review will not include a formal meeting.

In these circumstances IROs and social workers will need to undertake the following actions:

1. In place of a formal review meeting the IRO must visit the child in placement to speak to the child and obtain their wishes and feelings. During the same visit the IRO must speak to the carer(s). This visit must take place no later than six months after the recorded date of the last review meeting.
2. When producing a record of the review the date of the visit to the child must be recorded as the date that the review took place.
3. Communication between the IRO and the social worker must take place at least four weeks prior to the IRO visit to the child.
4. The social worker must produce an up to date care plan at least two weeks prior to the date of the IRO visit to the child and this plan must include reference to the decision that review meetings are agreed to take place annually.
5. The social worker must ensure that the single assessment that informs the care plan is up to date.
6. The IRO must communicate with any parent / person holding parental responsibility as part of the review process. The method of this communication will depend on the circumstances of each situation, but there is an expectation that the IRO will communicate directly with parents wherever possible, and that where parental views are not obtained there will be a clear explanation as to what efforts have been made to obtain these.
7. The IRO should identify with the social worker who the relevant professionals involved with the young person are – and which individuals should be part of the IRO consultation process.
8. The involvement of an independent visitor should be considered for all children subject to annual review meetings.
9. The record of the review should be completed on the normal electronic social care record on the child’s file. The record must include an explanation that the review has not taken place as a formal meeting – but through a process of consultation.
10. The IRO audit checklist must be completed for each child reviewed through this process of consultation as for any other review.
11. **Practice Guidance regarding the process for deciding the frequency of visits to children placed in agreed long term foster placements:**

Paragraph 3.233 of the amended Care Planning, Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 says “…the child must be visited at intervals of not more than six weeks for the first year of any placement. Visits during subsequent years must also take place at intervals of not more than six weeks unless the placement has been formally agreed as a permanent placement which is intended to last until the child is 18; in those circumstances, the intervals between visits in the second and subsequent years of placement must not be longer than three months.

Paragraph 3.234 says, “Where the child is placed in a long-term foster placement, the child should be visited within one week of the start of the placement. Thereafter, the child must be visited at intervals of not more that six weeks for the first year of the placement. Visits during subsequent years must take place at intervals of not more that six months, where the child, being of sufficient age and understanding, has agreed to be visited at this minimum frequency.

Paragraph 3.235 says, “However, the frequency of visits should always be determined by the circumstances of the case and the authority must arrange a visit whenever reasonably requested by a child or foster carer regardless of the status of the placement.

Any decision to reduce the frequency of visits below three monthly will be subject to the following guidance:

1. No child should be considered for six monthly visits unless the steps (1-6) recorded in the relevant information section above have been completed and the child has been living with the carers for more than one year.
2. The following circumstances must be in place before a decision to reduce frequency of visits to six monthly can be made:

* There have not been any identified child protection concerns in the previous twelve months.
* There have not been any concerns about the stability of the placement in the previous twelve months.
* The young person has not had their sixteenth birthday and is not subject to the pathway planning process
* The social worker has been the allocated social worker for the young person for a minimum of twelve months.
* The allocated social worker has developed a significant positive relationship with the young person
* The young person has a clear understanding of why they are looked after and what the plan is for their long term stability.

1. The agreement of the social worker’s line managers is necessary before any agreement is made with a child that visits will be reduced to a minimum of six monthly. The social worker’s line manager will be responsible for informing the allocated IRO that this decision has been made.
2. The decision to reduce the frequency of visits to the child must be recorded on the child’s case file as a separate case note (to include the decision reached and the reasons for the decision). The social worker’s line manager is responsible for recording this decision.
3. The decision to reduce the frequency of visits to the child must be reconsidered by the social worker and IRO as part of each review, and a record of this consideration and decision made must be recorded on the child’s file.
4. Where a child is receiving six monthly social work visits and there is a change in allocated social worker the team manager must ensure that the new worker increases the visiting frequency for an initial period – to ensure that the new worker is able to build a relationship with the child.

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08.02.2017