

**D A R L I N G T O N B O R O U G H C O U N C I L**

**Children and Adults Services**

**Supervised Contact Between Looked After Children and Their Families.**

## Introduction

Good quality, safe and meaningful contact between parents and their children is essential to ensure that children develop mentally, physically and psychologically. If children have to live apart from their family, good quality contact will help the child to develop an understanding of their identity. Providing a safe and secure environment to facilitate contact can help to promote the relationship between parent and child or between siblings. Darlington Borough Council has a statutory duty to promote and facilitate contact between Looked After Children, their families and others who have played an important part in their lives.

Contact will only be refused when there is clear evidence that it prevents the authority from safeguarding the child’s welfare. If contact is refused those affected will be notified.

## Key Powers and Duties

In accordance with the Children Act 1989 and Adoption and Children Act 2002 the Local Authority must, unless it is not reasonably practicable or consistent with their welfare, endeavour to promote contact between children who are Looked After and their parents. The Local Authority must ensure that parents know where a child who is Looked After is living unless the Local Authority has reasonable cause to believe that informing the parents would prejudice the child’s welfare.

The Local Authority has a duty to seek the wishes and feelings of the child with regard to contact arrangements.

Where the Local Authority is applying for a court order for a variation of the contact arrangements or refusal of contact, those affected must be notified and the reasons explained.

The responsibilities of providing contact has been strengthened by the Human Rights Act 1999, particularly in relation to the right to family life. Courts are mindful of the rights of parents when ordering contact and the need to balance these rights with the best interest of the child.

**Purpose of Supervised Contact**

Darlington Borough Council recognise that the purpose of supervising contact with parents or relatives is to protect and safeguard the child who may be at risk of physical violence, sexual abuse, abduction, intimidation or manipulation, exposure to alcohol, drugs or inappropriate material, uncontrolled or risky behaviour or inappropriate physical care.

Supervised contact can contribute to:

* Preparing the Looked After child and their families for a return home.
* Making decisions about the timing of a return home.
* Maintaining relationships with families when separation is extended or permanent.
* Assisting a child in coping with separation and loss.
* Supporting the development of identity when separation from a child’s family is long-term or permanent.
* Assisting a child’s understanding of why separation could be long-term or permanent.
* Carrying out assessments and collating information to assist in judgement about a parents’ ability to provide a safe home for a child.
* Providing professional help to the parents regarding how to respond to their child’s needs and how to manage a child’s behaviour.

**Planning Contact**

Care Plans define the aims and purpose of the care provided. Contact may be part of the plan and children, their parents and other family members need to be involved to ensure it works well. The contact plan enables the social worker and sometimes the carer to assess whether this is the correct course of action for the children.

The Contact Plan should include detailed assessment and analysis of –

* The purpose of contact.
* Why contact is important for the child and their family:
* Who the child should have contact with
* Why contact needs to be supervised.

The Referral Form should include the details

* The people involved in the contact session.
* Level of supervision required.
* Details of preferred dates and duration of contact.
* Details of preferred venues.
* Any limitations placed on the contact
* Completed Risk Assessment.
* If reports for court are required.
* How and when the contact will be reviewed.
* The kind of activities which you require during contact. (if any)

(Appendix1) risk assessment to be completed by the social worker prior to contact taking place

This procedure includes Darlington Borough Council Children’s Centres contact policy which should be adhered to if a Children’s Centre is the preferred venue,

**The Children and Young Persons Perspective**

While some children have strong views and are able to express their views others find it difficult to communicate because the emotions attached to contact are overwhelming. However all children should be supported to express their views in respect of contact,

Social workers and foster carers should be vigilant about seeking the views, wishes and feelings of children and young people in particular in relation to the frequency, length of contact, venue and the kind of activities they want to engage in during contact.

It is vital that social workers and foster carers should prepare the children for contact and enable them to talk through any fears, worries or apprehensions that they may be experiencing. Where the child’s wishes cannot be met the reasons for this should be clearly explained to them.

Additionally it is essential that the local authority consider sibling contact. Sibling relationships may be the longest lasting relationship a person has and be significant to ensure their identity and sense of belonging and enhance their understanding of their past..

**The Birth Families Perspective**

Birth families may feel humiliated, angry or guilty when their children become Looked After and many feel confused about the roles of social workers, other professionals and the way the legal system works.

Darlington Borough Council have a duty to promote and facilitate contact and ensure good quality contact is maintained. Contact will only be refused if there is clear evidence that the child’s welfare cannot be safeguarded. Support to birth families will be afforded by the social worker to help them to accept and cope with their feelings about the contact plan.

Leaflets *Supervised Contact for Children in Care, Information for Parents* are available for all parents/family members to help them understand the expectations in respect of contact.

**Management of the Supervised Contact Sessions**

If the plan states that the needs of the child can only be met if contact with family is supervised then the responsible Social Worker should discuss the practical arrangements with the Contact Coordinator ,the young person (if appropriate) the parent/family member and foster carer

The Contact Coordinator will be responsible for the management of practical arrangements ensuring:

* A Contact Support Officer (CSO) is available to cover each session.
* Venues are booked and they have copies of the appropriate risk assessments.
* Transport arrangements are in place.
* Planning of activities (if appropriate).
* Detailed recording on Liquid Logic
* Feedback to foster carers following contact to enable them to deal with the child’s response to contact.
* Feedback to parents following contact to enable them to deal with their child’s response to contact. This is particularly important if the Care plan is for the child to return to the care of their family.
* All parents are informed of the arrangements and are given contact details in case of emergencies.
* CSO’s will be available if necessary to attend/or send a report to Looked After Reviews and/or Planning Meetings.
* The contact is suspended and the child removed to a place of safety if the CSO believes there is a safeguarding issue.
* The social worker is informed of any significant issues/concerns.

The social worker should always supervise the initial contact and subsequently at regular intervals

If everyone is clear about their responsibilities and expectations and communication is affective then relationships between the professionals, families and children will be less difficult.

**Role of Foster Carer**

Contact is a key issue for Looked After Children, many spend a lot of time thinking about their families and, if age appropriate, they should be included in the planning process. Children can respond to contact in different ways. Some will be happy and anxiety free but many will experience feelings such as confusion, fear, anger, guilt, resentment and conflict.

The role of the foster carer in relation to contact will be determined by the purpose of supervised contact as recorded in the child’s Care Plan.

Occasionally the foster carer will be asked to supervise the contact between the child and their family. Some of the tasks which can be undertaken by foster carers include:

* Listening to parents and reassuring them that their children would be helped to understand why the parents could not care for them.
* Keeping calm and diffuse any issues between parents and the children.
* Dealing with children’s distress if there are good reasons for reducing or terminating contact. Explaining to children the need for contact against the need for protection.

**Recording**

The record on Liquid Logic should give a clear and precise overview of the session.

The referrer should be clear about what aspects of the contact should be observed. The records are important and may prove essential if there is a dispute or a complaint.

**Conclusions**

Darlington Borough Council ensures that contact arrangements are based on the needs of the child and in accordance with their overall care plan. Contact will only be reduced or suspended if there is clear evidence that it prevents the authority from safeguarding the child’s welfare.

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