



Connected Person Foster Carers & Special Guardianship Order (SGO) Assessments Policy, Procedure and Practice Guidance

This policy and guidance has been updated to take account of the 2016 regulations.

'Any permanence order issued should significantly improve a child's outcomes, not marginally'. (ADCS Sept 2015).

Birmingham Children's Trust practice is that the family should be given the opportunity to support parents to keep the child within the family. 'It is not appropriate for Children's Services to be selecting the family member or making decisions about how family members care for the child by drawing up working agreements or putting restrictions on contact, etc.'

Children subject to Child Protection or Child in Need plans should be tracked and monitored through reviewing systems and supervision and therefore any significant risk which has arisen requiring a child needing to be cared for by the Trust will in most situations be predictable. Formal Pre-Proceedings under the Public Law Outline gives parents every chance to change their behaviour and demonstrate they can provide safe care arrangements for their children.

Consideration should be given to holding a Family Group Conference / Family Meeting to help the family come to their own care decisions. Children's Trust staff must work with families to identify potential relatives or friends who can offer support (including full time care) during the CIN and CP process so that should a child need to come into care the connected person can be assessed in advance, potentially avoiding emergencies or care proceedings. (See below for process). This enables child centred and timely care planning. In assessing what is in the child's best interest the focus must be on the needs of the child now, and in the future. A key part of all assessments must be the analysis of the capability of any potential caregiver to offer good permanent care, through all the stages of childhood to at least 18 years of age.

All potential carers offering permanence will need an understanding of the impact of the early care on the emotional and behavioural development of the child. The accessing of support services in times of need must be encouraged regardless of the type of order or relationship to the child.

When a child needs to come into the care of Birmingham Children's Trust, we should have an understanding of the likely exit plan. In order to achieve this all options for permanence need to start being thoroughly explored as soon as child protection concerns come to light.

PRACTICE GUIDANCE

This guidance must be followed.

Potential Family Options

This guidance outlines the varied circumstances in which children and young people are cared for by family and friends and the Trust's responsibility in each of these situations.

Private Family Arrangements

Close family frequently care for children/young people to support birth parents. The Trust does not have a role in such arrangements, unless it is requested, and then the Trust should not intervene for any length of time unless there are concerns about the child's welfare.

In these circumstances the Trust may be approached to consider making a Child in Need Assessment and to provide services to support the child including financial support under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989. However, all parental and financial responsibility for the child remains with the parent/s.

There are occasions where a Social Worker will support or facilitate parents to seek family members to care for a child in circumstances where the parent/s is struggling to meet their child's needs adequately.

A family can be supported to consider and identify alternative arrangements for a child and support for parents via a Family Group Conference / Family Meeting. At the Family Group Conference / Family Meeting, a plan agreed by parents will be formulated by the family that can be implemented in the event of parents not being able to provide protective care.

It is important that absent parents (often fathers) and their extended family are encouraged as soon as possible to be engaged and involved in decision-making about their children.

These arrangements are often referred to as private arrangements and parental responsibility remains with parents. There is no ongoing role for Children's Services. The Social Worker in these circumstances has supported the parent to make a safe choice for their child and should not need to remain involved for any length of time. However, if the parent's situation is such that any aspect of the child's daily life is being dictated by the Trust, e.g. contact with a parent or where the child lives, then it cannot be considered a family arrangement.

Private Fostering

A Private Fostering Arrangement is where a child is cared for by people who are not 'close relatives' for more than 28 days, following an agreement between the parent and carer. Close relatives are defined as Step-Parents, Grandparents, Brothers, Sisters, Uncles or Aunts.

The Children's Trust must be informed as they have several responsibilities to fulfil in order to assess the Private Fostering Arrangement by visiting the carer and child and ensuring the arrangements are adequate. Parental responsibility, including financial responsibility, is retained by the parents.

Need for a Regulated Placement (Coming into Care)

If Birmingham Children's Trust becomes involved in orchestrating the placement in any way, for example: imposing restrictions on who can/cannot care for a child; monitoring the placement; imposing supervised contact; or entering into signed working agreements, this is no longer a private arrangement and becomes a formal arrangement or placement and requires the child to be placed in a regulated placement, i.e. a Local Authority approved foster placement.

If a placement with a connected person is being considered the Social Worker must confirm that the proposed connected person has had a significant role in the child's life. The connected person should have been identified in advance and had initial approval (see procedure below), and only if this has happened can the child be placed with the connected person. If this has not happened, then the child will need to be placed with a mainstream carer while the assessment of the connected carer is completed.

In all such cases the usual process for seeking agreements to bring a child into care will need to be followed: i.e. presentation at Area Resource Panel.

If the Police remove a child under Police Protection Powers under Section 46 of the Children Act 89 then the child must be treated as a "looked after" child and, if the child does not return to parents immediately, the child must be placed in a regulated placement.

Coming into Care

The common pathways for children to come into care are: -

- Section 20 of Children Act 1989 – voluntary accommodation at the request of parents – parents retain parental responsibility for the child; and
- Police Protection (PP), maximum 72 hours

For an Emergency Protection Order (EPO) or Interim Care Order (ICO) where a child is suffering or likely to suffer significant harm – the Local Authority shares parental responsibility with those who hold parental responsibility.

Parallel planning is important for the child to ensure permanence is achieved as soon as possible. Connected persons should be assessed alongside the assessment of a possible return to parent/s. In addition, other permanence options, including Adoption away from the birth family, should also be pursued in case it is decided that family options are not in the child's best interests.

We have a responsibility to identify suitable potential connected carers within the child's existing network of family and friends, but it is important that care arrangements with family and friends are realistic and not entered into until appropriate assessments have been undertaken.

Throughout the assessment process there must be evidence at key points that all permanence options are weighed up as to their strengths in relation to what will serve the child's best interest throughout their childhood.

PROCEDURE

Assessing Connected Carers to Provide Permanence for the Child Stage 1 - The Application

The child's Social Worker will provide information to any possible family or friend about what being a connected carer means for them.

The child's Social Worker via the connected person's application form will ascertain:

1. What relationship and regular contact the child has to the proposed carer;
2. What support the proposed carer has provided to the child and family in crisis;
3. What accommodation the proposed carer will be able to provide for the child;
4. What are the applicant's aspirations for the child;
5. A very brief summary of any health or social issues that we need to be aware of at the earliest point.

Once the area team is satisfied and can evidence that:

The connected person is a close relative of the child who has been involved in the child's life thus far;

The connected person is a significant person who has been closely involved in the child's life thus far;

Any other adult who lives in the prospective connected person's house is also fully committed to taking on the care of the child.

and

- The connected person is reasonably able to make a long-term (at least until the child reaches 18) commitment to care for the child via Adoption, SGO, or Child Arrangement Order.
- The connected person has the capacity in their own family to meet the child's needs throughout their childhood, including having appropriate accommodation (i.e. the child should have a bedroom).
- The connected person is able to arrange and manage contact between the child and the child's birth family where appropriate during the child's minority.
- The child's Social Worker will send the application to the Connected Persons Team and together they will consider the viability assessment of the applicant.

Stage 2 - Viability

The viability assessment must be of a high standard. This is an initial assessment of suitability contributed to by the child's Social Worker and the Connected Persons Team Social Worker. There will be a maximum of 2 viability assessments completed per child.

The child's Social Worker assesses whether the prospective carer/s can meet the needs of the child throughout their childhood. The Social Worker then forwards the viability to the Connected Persons Team for joint consideration as to whether to progress to full assessment.

The standard of care for an assessment of a connected person must be the same as the standard of care that would be expected of any assessment for Adopters or Foster Carers. The viability assessment should be completed within 2 weeks. Initial consideration must include the prospective carer's own children and the likely impact of another child in the family upon them.

The viability assessment will be completed on the BAAF Form C; this will form the basis of the full report should the application progress.

The child's Social Worker should discuss with the applicant the child's needs and how the child's needs will be addressed within their current family, how contact will be arranged and supported, including supporting the child's relationship with their birth parents and siblings. The child's Social Worker will complete the social history of the child and his/her family so that the Connected Persons Team can make the link to the reality of caring for the child in the fuller assessment.

The child's Social Worker will explore with the applicant/s the various legal routes and potential fostering applications bearing in mind the age and permanence plan for the child. Where two adults are living together in a household our expectation is that both will become Special Guardians or Connected Persons Foster Carers. The child's Social Worker will assess the initial understanding the applicant/s have of the implications of providing permanence for the child and make an analysis of the likelihood of this being a good permanence option for the child.

The Connected Persons Team will assess the applicant's ability to manage and understand the changing needs of contact and its impact as the child matures. This part of the assessment will be re-visited throughout the fuller assessment, should it proceed, and consider any form of support that may be needed to ensure the child's safety.

The child's Social Worker will complete a genogram and an Eco map with the applicants and make an initial assessment outlining the potential of the applicants to be able to offer permanence to the child.

Stage 3 - Full Assessment of Connected Foster Carer OR Special Guardian

Where the viability assessment indicates that there are carers who are able and willing to meet the long-term needs of the child, the carers will progress to a full assessment which will take 12 weeks. The assessment will be completed on the Form C template by the Connected Persons Team and consider both Fostering and Special Guardianship options in the one assessment.

The Connected Persons Team will undertake checks - DBS, Medical, Local Authority, Social Media, and determine at least 3 personal references. If possible, they will also speak to any ex-partners of any potential connected person carer.

Where the applicants are considered as a connected person, there is an expectation that they participate in developing their learning, which will include as a minimum: managing contact, building and understanding attachment, and the impact of early trauma on development and behaviour. They will explore and develop applicants during the assessment process.

The learning will run in conjunction with the assessment process in both cases.

To be successful as a Special Guardian / Connected Carer, the applicant's full assessment will need to demonstrate that the care they can offer is of an equal standard to that of any carer being assessed as a Foster Carer or an Adopter. The assessment will include:

- An assessment of the relationship between the child and the prospective Guardian/s;
- The ability of the applicant/s to support the child to overcome the impact of any abuse or neglect in early life;
- The effect on the child into adulthood of being cared for under a Special Guardianship Order; and
- The ability of the applicant/s to manage any risk to the child of any pre-existing relationship between the applicant and the child's birth parents.

The applicant/s relationship history must be explored in depth and self-reported information verified by referees.

Availability of physical and emotional space and the ability to assist the child to develop healthy bonds will be part of the assessment.

If the applicant/s have had previous problems of a medical, financial or criminal nature, evidence should be included as to how they have moved forward and what the current situation is, and the likely impact on the child.

All references will include Local Authority checks for all members of the household over 18 years of age, employer references, ex-partners spoken to personally, DBS for all those in the household, where a positive result is evident, the check must be referred initially to the Head of Service, and then to the DBS Panel.

Where the applicant/s have a child/children living in the household, or elsewhere, the impact of the child (they are being assessed for) coming into their family on the child/ren in the household, or elsewhere, and their welfare must be considered and included in the assessment.

Where the applicant has school aged children the school will be approached for a reference as to parenting capacity. Three personal references will be interviewed in person and include one family reference.

All references and medical checks must be in place and any discrepancies followed through and adequately resolved prior to the report being finalised. All information must be evidenced or triangulated, and not taken at face value.

An agreement will be established with the applicant that should the child leave their care, then they will undertake to notify Children's Services.

The midpoint review is held at 6/7 weeks. There will be a review meeting to consider the findings of the assessment thus far. This meeting will include the child's Social Worker, the Connected Persons Team Assessor and respective Team Managers, and must include the view of the IRO. This meeting will also consider both the financial and practical support needs of the potential placement and consider the support plan to be presented to the Court with the assessment.

Stage 4 - Signing off assessment report (Quality Assurance)

The child's Social Worker is responsible for the care plan of the child. The progress of the assessment must be shared with the child's Social Worker throughout so that parallel planning can be active and informed by the connected person's assessment in a timely manner. The child's care plan will be overseen through the Statutory Review Process by the IRO. The Head of Service for the child's Social Worker signs off all Care Plans for children subject to court proceedings, and therefore they will be assuring the Court that the placement with the connected person is the best way to meet that child's needs.

The assessment report will be submitted to the Connected Persons Team Manager who will ensure that the assessment is child focused, of good quality, is thorough and analytical in its assessment of the prospective carers and that there is clear evidence to inform the recommendation/s. A recommendation will not be submitted to the Panel or Court on any assessment without all references including DBS and medicals being reviewed.

Once the Connected Persons Team Manager is satisfied that the assessment is of good quality, and is thoroughly analytical of the assessment of the carers and their ability to meet the child's needs, the Team Manager for the child will ensure that they too are satisfied with the standard of the assessment and make the decision as to whether or not that is the preferred permanence option for the child. If this decision results in a change of plan for the child, then the IRO must be consulted and, if the IRO requires, the next Statutory Review can be brought forward to consider the Care Plan.

Where the assessment recommends fostering, the usual Fostering Regulations will apply, and it will be presented to the Fostering Panel for consideration.

Stage 5 - Placement and Support

When a Special Guardianship Order is made the child will remain open to the child's Social Worker on a CIN plan for a period of **no less than 12 weeks**, during which time the child should be seen alone at least twice. The SGO Support Team will keep the case open for **no less than six months from the order** maintaining contact and offering support to encourage an ongoing link with the Trust. This will give an opportunity to review and update the Special Guardianship plan.

Following the making of the Order all agencies involved with the child will be notified by the child's Social Worker that the child is placed with the Special Guardian and the date of the Order.

The Connected Persons (Fostering) Team run regular support and training events for connected Foster Carers that will now include those approved for Special Guardianship. The Connected Persons Team produce a quarterly newsletter advertising events of interest and training events for Foster Carers and Adopters, which will be available to Special Guardians.

The Connected Persons Team will provide more specific support for situations where individual support is required, such as working with schools or managing complex behaviours etc.

All financial support will be reviewed annually. If the child's placement with a Special Guardian ends prematurely and the child once again is the subject of Children's Services intervention, then a disruption meeting must be convened by the Connected Persons Team and lessons learned must be the subject of future training for all teams and panel.

Emergency Process

Every effort should be made to place children safely within their extended family or friendship group. Any immediate placement must be agreed by an agency decision maker, until such a time, the placement is not approved. Once the decision maker has approved the placement, the adults are approved as temporary foster carers.

Prior to any temporary approval, a joint visit must be undertaken with the child's Social Worker and Connected Persons Team. The application in these circumstances will be completed jointly by the child's Social Worker and the Duty Assessor from the Connected Persons Team. The visit will consider these bullet points: -

- The nature and quality of any existing relationship with the child.
- Accommodation and space for the child.
- Understanding of risk and safeguarding concerns.
- Any criminal offences – PNC check for all household members 18 or over to be viewed as soon as possible
- Health of the applicant via a GP reference.