



**BIRMINGHAM
CHILDREN'S TRUST**

CONTACT PRACTICE GUIDANCE

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1. Introduction

Birmingham Children's Trust is committed to ensuring that looked after children have appropriate contact with family members and other significant people in their lives. It is essential that a Contact Plan is established immediately as a child comes into care and that it is regularly reviewed. The child's wellbeing and the importance of maintaining their emotional and psychological needs through family contact should be at the forefront of this planning.

Social Workers should explore all opportunities for contact as children and young people have a legal right to have contact with their birth family as this is in the child's best interests. The child/young person should always be asked about the contact arrangements they want or do not want. Foster carers should also be involved and asked where appropriate to facilitate contact and ensure that the contact arrangements do not disrupt the stability of placement. Contact arrangements should always be shaped around the child's needs.

2. Law and guidance

[Children Act 1989 Schedule 2 Para 15](#)

This paragraph sets out our duty to promote contact between children in care and their parents, others who hold parental responsibility for them, their relatives and friends, and other significant people.

[Children Act 1989 section 34](#)

This section sets out the duty to allow reasonable contact between a child who is the subject of a Care Order and:

- his/her parents and any guardian or special guardian s/he may have
 - any step-parent who has parental responsibility for him/her
 - any person who had parental responsibility for him/her by virtue of a Residence Order or Child Arrangements Order immediately before the Care Order was made
- and
- any person who was his/her carer by virtue of an order under the inherent jurisdiction of the High Court immediately before the Care Order was made

[Care Planning Placement and Case Review Regulations 2010 Regulation 8.](#)

This regulation sets out the requirements that must be met when a local authority wishes to refuse to allow the contact that is required under section 34 of the Children Act 1989, or to depart from the terms of an order under section 34.

[The Children Act 1989 Guidance Volume 2 Paragraphs 2.78 – 2.101](#) gives general guidance on issues relating to contact.

3. Purpose of contact

It is important to be clear about the purpose of contact so that arrangements can be made that are consistent with the contact objectives. **The purpose of contact is always first and foremost for the benefit of the child and it should always be in the child's best interests.** The child's needs and the objectives of contact are likely to change during the period a child is in care and the child's contact needs should be regularly reviewed. There may be several objectives that apply at any particular time, such as:

- developing or maintaining an attachment to a parent
- maintaining a key relationship
- being part of a parenting assessment
- being part of a rehabilitation plan
- developing the child's identity
- meeting the child's emotional and psychological needs
- a court order or direction

4. Who contact should be with

The Contact Plan should always consider parents, brothers and sisters. However there may be other people of significance for the child. This can include grandparents or other relatives, family friends, previous carers and their children, and a possible future carer.

Wherever possible there should be discussions with the child, parents or those with parental responsibility to determine the significant people in the child's life and give consideration as to how they can be included in contact arrangements. For all individuals involved in contact the purpose of that contact should be defined and contact arrangements put in place which are consistent with that purpose.

5. Frequency of contact

Frequency of contact should be planned on an individual basis that takes into account the needs and wishes of the child, the purpose of contact and the impact of contact on the child. Contact arrangements should be regularly reviewed particularly if they are causing the child distress or disrupting the child's current care arrangements, or posing any risk of harm to the child.

Where contact arrangements are agreed as part of a Court Care Plan, they should still be regularly reviewed in discussion between the Social Worker, child, Contact

Supervisor, current carer etc. and any changes discussed as part of the child's care review. Review of contact is particularly important once the child has settled into a long-term care arrangement. The child's needs for contact at entry to care or at the end of care proceedings will be different to when the child is in long-term matched placement and should be regularly (at least annually) reviewed and adjusted to reflect this.

In relation to arrangements for babies and infants, research has shown that the following need to be considered when planning the frequency of contact:

- babies and infants need time to settle into a placement and form an attachment to their primary carer i.e. foster carer
- lengthy periods away from their placement and being transported by strangers to contact is not usually in their best interests
- protracted contact with parents who may be upset or unwell or pre-occupied may also harmful to their development

Contact needs to be set at a level which enables the baby/infant to begin to form a relationship with the parent. As the parent shows that they are able to make the required changes in order to provide an acceptable level of care, so contact can be increased to allow an attachment to be built.

6. Different types of contact

There are many children in care, particularly older children, for whom contact with family members can take place unsupervised. Indeed, generally supervised contact should not be arranged with parents of children in section 20 care as this is a voluntary arrangement. However in all unsupervised contact arrangements, carers need to check with the child before and afterwards that arrangements are suitable and the child's contact experience was positive.

The majority of supervised contact will be through formal, specific, time limited face to face arrangements for children who are in care through a court order, including an interim care order. Generally, we should not be involved in arranging contact through orders that give parental responsibility such as Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) or Child Arrangement Orders (CAO).

Where children are in stable foster care placements there is an expectation that Foster Carers will arrange transport, the venue and any necessary oversight.

For older children there is often no need for contact to be supervised but carers should have conversations with the young person before and after each contact to ensure it remains safe and appropriate.

There are increasingly other forms of contact for children. These can be arranged to supplement and enhance direct contact but should be monitored by carers to ensure that the child is not being unduly influenced or distressed. These other forms may include: telephone; text; Skype; letters and social media. These other forms can be woven in as part of the overall Contact Plan.

7. Supervising, assessing and facilitating contact

All Contact Workers who supervise contact should be aware of and follow the guidance set out in the Contact Service's [Workers Handbook](#). In broad terms contact can be supervised, assessed or facilitated and it is important to be clear about what is required in each situation and the reasons for this.

- **Supervised Contact** is where there is a third party present throughout the contact to protect the child's wellbeing and to ensure that the contact arrangements are adhered to.
- **Assessed Contact** is where there is a suitably trained worker present for all or some of the contact to observe and assess the interaction between the parent and child. In some situations this will be the allocated Social Worker. Such observations need to be properly recorded and might be used as evidence in the family court.
- **Facilitated Contact** is where the emphasis is on providing practical and possibly emotional support to the child and parent to ensure that timely, regular and good quality contact is taking place.

All of the above types of contact should result in a contact record setting out the time of contact, nature of interaction, positives and concerns observed. This record should be sent to the Social Worker to enter on the child's record.

There should be clarity around the specific risk factors and why supervised contact is required. If contact is to be observed or supervised then the parent should always be informed in writing to avoid any misunderstanding, setting out the purpose of the contact. Social Workers should consider the age and needs of the child/young person in deciding if contact should be supervised.

There are a number of factors associated with difficult or detrimental contact:

- the parent does not accept or undermines the placement
- the parent insists on maintaining their role as the main carer and discourages the child from accepting the new family
- the child has been seriously maltreated or traumatised in the past (including exposure to domestic violence)
- the parent has been neglectful, abusive or rejected the child during visits

- the parent is unreliable and persistently late
- there are significant personal difficulties e.g. substance misuse
- the parent uses contact to undermine, threaten or cause conflict with carers.
- there is a risk to carers or the child and threats of abduction

All of the above factors are valid reasons for the Social Worker to review the frequency, venue, timing and supervision arrangement for the child's contact.

Contact should be supervised wherever possible by a consistent person who has built a relationship with both the child and parents. If there is a language barrier the need for an interpreter, in addition to the supervisor, should be considered.

The supervisor needs to be clear about their role and what is and is not acceptable behaviour within the contact session. If the child becomes distressed, is unduly pressured or the parent behaves inappropriately, the supervisor should end the session and record what has happened.

These issues are most effectively avoided by a Contact Plan that sets out the expectations that are discussed in advance with the parents. If there are serious risks such as threats to members of staff, inappropriate behaviour, possible abduction of the child then a full risk assessment will be required which explicitly deals with these risks and how they can be minimised.

If an assessment of contact is required then this needs to be undertaken by a worker who has the appropriate experience and skills. It is important that the allocated Social Worker is actively involved in at least some of the contact sessions to observe the interaction between the parent and the child as ultimately this will inform the assessment or the Care Plan.

Whichever of the above forms the contact takes, the worker supervising should try to make the environment for contact as calm and fun as possible, with games, toys and activities that bring the child and parents or others together in shared activities.

Where a child is accommodated under section 20 and the Children's Trust is working in partnership with the parents or carers who hold full parental responsibility, we will not supervise contact unless in very exceptional circumstances agreed by the Head of Service. However there is an important role for the allocated Social Worker to facilitate contact by ensuring where necessary that practical arrangements are in place i.e. transport, venue etc. and there is appropriate support for the child.

8. Contact support plans

The child's Care Plan should be kept up to date to include current contact arrangements, contact details for those involved in the arrangements and any support required to enable contact to take place. Details on expectations should be provided to the parents in writing and include what items of food, activities or gifts can be provided by them during the contact. Consideration should also be given to:

- emotional and practical support before and after visits
- establishing roles during the contact session e.g. who will parent the child
- financial help with parental travel or paying for activities during contact
- help to take part in special family events e.g. wedding
- access to quality venues
- circumstances which will lead to contact being terminated

9. Financial support to access contact

Parents should be supported financially to attend contact if they would be unable to attend contact without this support. Funding will be provided to meet the reasonable public transport costs of getting to and from the contact venue. If funding is required approval should be sought from the Team Manager.

10. The contact venue

The venue used for contact will significantly impact on the quality of contact. Where possible a venue should be used where the child and parents are comfortable and familiar such as the family home, Foster Carer's home or home of a relative or friend. Alternatively a venue in the community where the parent and child can share an activity can be considered particularly for older children.

However this has to be balanced against the potential risks of contact and the need for supervised contact.

The more informal the contact setting the more difficult it is to supervise. If contact is taking place in the family home or that of another family member consideration is needed as to whether this is a suitable environment for a supervisor and whether the level of supervision required can be undertaken.

In many situations where contact is being supervised a more formal venue will be required. The Children's Trust has access to a number of contact venues/rooms across the city and advice on locations can be provided by Contact Co-ordinators, who can be contacted on 0121 675 8534. A list of contact venues can also be accessed at Appendix 3.

Children's centres can also be considered for younger children. For babies and infants it is important that a resource close to the placement is used whenever possible, including considering whether the contact can take place at the placement, to minimise transport.

Maintaining contact venues of a suitable standard is important as this will impact on the quality of the contact. Contact Workers should record any concerns about the venue on a [Contact Service Feedback Form](#) and ensure compliance with the [Maintaining Contact Venue Standards Guidance](#)

11. Refusal, variation or terminating of contact

Those with parental responsibility have a right to have reasonable contact with their child whilst they are in care, unless such contact is not in the child's best interests. Where a child is subject to an interim Care Order or Care Order there may be times when contact with the parent represents a risk and contact needs to be terminated. Even though there is a duty to promote contact, children have a right to be protected from harmful contact.

The impact and benefit for the child of contact should be regularly reviewed by the Social Worker and, if a major change to contact arrangements is to be considered, the social worker must inform the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) of their intention. The IRO, taking into account the child's wishes and feelings, will determine whether a statutory child in care review is to be convened or not to consider the changes.

If, following communication with the social worker, the IRO is satisfied that a review is not necessary a record of this agreement and the reasons for it should be placed on the child's file. The child and other relevant adults, both within the family and the professional network, should be advised. (IRO handbook sections 3.74 to 3.76.)

It is good practice to inform the parents of the changes to contact in person in order to explain the reasons for the changes and to consider their views but any changes to the contact arrangements should also be communicated to parents, carers and children in writing.

Whilst a child is in care proceedings, proposed changes to contact should be agreed in the Family Court. Once a care order is given and a child is placed in a long term fostering or residential placement, contact should again be reviewed to ensure it is not disrupting attachments in the placement.

In emergency situations the Trust has the power to suspend contact for up to 7 days. The Social Worker should discuss concerns with their Team Manager and IRO and, if it is decided that continued refusal of contact is required, legal advice should

be sought to make a section 34 (4) application to terminate contact within 7 days. If an application to terminate contact is to be made, legal services should first be consulted.

12. Recording contact

Once a Contact Plan is agreed, all scheduled contact sessions are to be input onto the electronic recording system under the activities section for contact. Each contact activity will be assigned to the Social Worker allocated to the case.

The contact team facilitators in each area are responsible for inputting the contact for their area under the same activities as the area teams.

There are 11 activities that can be chosen to record the most appropriate activity. This will need to be completed for each child to reflect the most up to date status. It is good practice that Contact Plans are shared with parents/caregivers as soon as possible and cover the next 12 months.

It is the responsibility of the Social Worker to ensure that all contact activity is input onto the electronic recording system as above and to ensure that the activities are updated and closed off. The details relating to each contact must be accurate, factual and timely.

13. Comments, compliments and complaints

It is good practice to invite feedback from the child, parent, carers and or other individuals involved in the contact. Feedback should be recorded on a [Contact Service Feedback Form](#), a copy of which is also available on the back page of the Supervised Contact Session Monitoring Form. The member of staff undertaking the contact can also add their own views on this form. This information should also be recorded on the electronic recording system as this will help to inform good practice and assist with service improvements.

14. Where regular contact has not been possible

If children or young people do not have regular contact with their parents consideration should always be given to making a referral for an Independent Visitor in the Rights and Participation Service.

All children in care should have regular family assessments and reviews and any changes in contact arrangements should always be fully explored as part of this assessment.

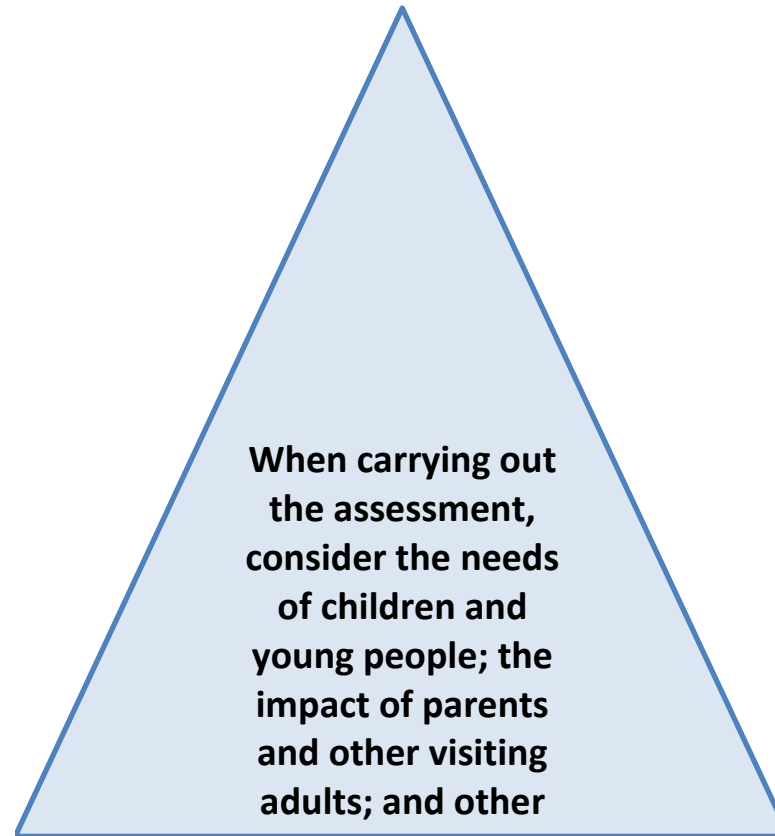
Appendix 1: Guidance for assessment of contact/family time arrangements

Parents/Visiting Adults Factors

- Have the parents or adults made any positive or negative changes since the children have been removed e.g. ending a relationship?
- What is the parents' or adults' understanding of concerns and attitude to children being looked after; have they used supervised sessions to discuss these with the child (inappropriately or appropriately)?

Risk assessment and effects on parenting towards these or any other child

- Risk of physical, sexual, neglect and emotional abuse (including domestic violence).
- Any mental health issues or disabilities.
- History of alcohol or drug misuse (including presentation when seeing the children).
- Risk of abduction.
- Is there a history of violent or aggressive behaviour? Is a supervisor at risk?
- Parents' ability to prioritise the children's needs above their own?
- Parents' understanding of concerns and any engagement history.



Children/Young People

- What does the child enjoy doing in contact / family time and where?
- Attachment history.
- Wishes and feelings (non-verbal and verbal communication).
- Any additional health needs or disabilities to consider?
- What does the research base say to inform the assessment of contact?
- Behaviour before and after any contact / family time that has taken place.
- What is the care plan for the child(ren)?
- What can a Family Group Conference contribute to the plan?
- Who does the child want Contact / Family Time with?
- What does the child or young person want to call contact / family time?

Other Factors

- What is an appropriate venue for contact / family time? carer's home?
- Is a ringing in or early system required (timekeeping and reliability)?
- Can sessions be supervised by a carer; have the carers been appropriately trained?
- Can sessions be supervised by a family member?
- Can sessions be 'facilitated' within a contact centre e.g. part-supported?
- What needs to be included in an agreement?
- If there is insufficient confidence to move immediately to fully unsupervised, set out what the concerns are and share these with the parents / adults.
- What would need to happen for sessions to be unsupervised and what are the timescales for this?
- What is the role of the supervisor within supervised sessions?

In addition to the factors considered in the assessment triangle above, once contact has taken place, any further assessment and analysis should also include what has been learnt from the contact. This includes providing a summary of the key points from the recording of supervised contact / family time to include:

- Impact on the child or young person
- Parental or adult behaviour and engagement
- Suitability of the location
- Was the frequency and the duration right for the child or young person
- Was the agreement kept to by the parents / adults
- Did the arrangements work well?

The proposal for contact arrangements should cover the following

- Frequency and duration
- Who the child or young person will have contact with
- Location
- Suggested activity
- Whether the sessions should be supervised, facilitated and by whom, or unsupervised
- What needs to be included in an agreement
- How frequently the arrangements should be reviewed

Appendix 2

Click here to access the: [List of Contact Forms and When to Use Those](#)

Appendix 3

Click here to access the [Contact Venues Directory](#)