

Return Home Reference Tool

This is a summary and is not a replacement for any Return Home Procedures or Safety Planning workbook (see link).

These should only be used once there is agreement for the child to be returned to family

The purpose of this Reference Tool is to assist social workers with how to plan for a child / young person to return to the care of their family after a period of being looked after, in order for this to have the best possible chance of success. The guidance focuses on what good reunification planning looks like and brings our reunification planning into line with Signs of Safety / Success Practice. This process is designed to be used once agreement has been reached by all of the key professionals and the family that we should be working towards reunification, including the strategic manager for your locality (who needs to be notified and agree the proposed reunification from the outset), the IRO and our legal department where children are subject to court orders.

A key aim in Signs of Success is for children and young people to remain connected to their families and natural networks of support so that they have a sense of identity and belonging that stays with them. This includes always being on the lookout for opportunities to reunite children and young people with their families where this is in their best interests and they can be kept safe. We know that as children grow up, many will vote with their feet so that they can live with their families again and that this often happens in an unplanned way, or we eventually agree that children and young people can return home when we have run out of other options for them.

In SOS we continue to look for opportunities to create safety as soon as a child / young person has been removed from their parents care so that we can reunite children with their families in a safe way. The crisis of a child being removed can often be a catalyst for change and can create space for new ways of working with families.

This reunification guide consists of 3 parts:

1. Summary sheet
2. Timeline / Trajectory
3. Checklist

1. Summary Sheet

This tool brings together a summary of the what the worries are, the existing strengths, safety and networks around the family and what the child(ren), parents and professionals would like to happen (goals). It is intended as a summary for the

family that they can stick on their fridge and allows managers and senior leaders to understand what is happening with the child / young person and their family, at a glance. This summary sheet should be sent to your strategic manager before progressing the reunification plan for their sign off and agreement.

Worries – use this section to summarise what the child / young person, parents and professionals are worried about and how this affects the child

Strengths, Safety and Networks – use this section to summarise what is already working in relation to the worries, times when the worries have been less and who the people are who help out (family network) so that life is better or safer for the child / young person

Child / Young Person's goals – what does the child / young person want to happen or change? What are their ideas about how to achieve this?

Parent / Carer goals – what does the parent / carer want to happen or change? What are their ideas about how to achieve this?

Professional goals – what do professionals need to see happen for them to be reassured that that child / young person will be safe and well cared for?

Success scale – using the scaling question provided, ask the parent(s) and professionals to rate how confident they are that the reunification will succeed. Use scaling as an opportunity to explore what else needs to happen for their confidence to increase.

Parent / child evaluation – check with the parent(s) and child / young person how well they feel that their views have been understood and captured using the scaling question provided. Use scaling as an opportunity to ask them what else would need to happen for them to feel listened to and have their views heard.

2. Timeline / Trajectory

Parents involved in child protection systems say that they often feel alienated from the process, they don't understand what we expect of them and they tell us that we keep moving the goal posts so they never see an end in sight. This can lead to families feeling hopeless. In a recent study a father tells us:

'I felt disillusioned by just how little information they give you, how the procedure is going to go...Every week I learned something new about what's going to happen next. I am dealing with them for last four years...Still don't know what they want. (Khan et. al. 2018, p 4)'

Meanwhile, social workers and other professionals find themselves caught up in a system that encourages us to continually gather information and move from task to

task, often without an overall vision of what needs to happen in order for it to be safe enough for the child / young person to be able to return home.

The Signs of Safety trajectory and timeline tool are designed to document a clear pathway to help professionals and the family understand what needs to happen and in what timeframe in order for the child / young person to return home and for children's services to be able to end their involvement in the family's life.

A trajectory is a work plan of key tasks that need to be successfully completed in order for the child / young person to return home. We create this trajectory alongside a timeline which sets out the number of weeks that the social worker, family and professionals think will be needed to complete the tasks, up to the point where Children's Social Care can end their involvement and close the child's file. We use weeks rather than specific dates as dates may be more likely to lapse.

We can't progress until the tasks for each week are completed. If the tasks aren't being completed then this allows us to reflect with the family about what is getting in the way of this and what their ideas are for moving forward. This analysis can also inform our parenting assessments, e.g. the parent's capacity to change if we aren't able to move on to the next task in the trajectory.

The length of time needed to complete the key tasks will depend on the individual circumstances of the child / young person and their family and the child / young person's timeframe where this has been mandated by the court. The social worker will also need to take into account their own workload and map out how long they will need to complete each task so that this isn't creating drift for the child / young person and their family.

Where a child / young person has only recently been removed from their family (for example under Section 20), they continue to have a relationship with their family, family time is unsupervised and safety planning has been taking place since the child has been removed, then the trajectory and timeline to return this child / young person to their parents care will be shorter than a timeline / trajectory for a child or young person who has been looked after for a lengthy period of time or who has spent limited time with their parents, or where there are a number of worries to be addressed. Typically these children and young people will be subject to Care Orders and the social worker will need to consider what needs to be achieved and maintained over what period of time in order to apply for the Care Order to be discharged.

Although it may be quicker or may take longer depending on the individual circumstances of each child / young person and their family, a reunification timeline / trajectory would usually take between 4 to 8 months and involve between 8 and 16 meetings with the network.

Group Supervision can be a helpful way to support social workers to think through the tasks and the likely timescales to reunite a child / young person with their family as perspectives on this often differ.

The reunification trajectory can be organised according to three sections:

1. Preparation
2. Planning
3. Monitoring and Review

The key tasks within the reunification trajectory are:

- Mapping, leading to clear and understandable danger statement(s), safety goal(s), bottom lines and safety scaling questions which are shared with the parents, the child / young person and their network
- An informed network of important people in the child / young person and family's life, which could include wider family members, friends, neighbours and community resources.
- A words and pictures explanation for the child / young person about what has led to them becoming looked after (if this hasn't already happened at the point that they came to be looked after) and an explanation of their final plan
- Planning with the network to create a clear plan about who will do what to make sure that the child / young person is kept safe now and in the future.

Preparation Stage

Mapping:

Look at the history to clarify what were the harmful (usually adult) behaviours that led to the child / young person becoming looked after (timespan, frequency, severity of the first, worst and last incidents, impact on the child / young person).

The Harm Matrix can be used to help with this:

http://teams.durham.gov.uk/sites/cas/signssafety/sostools/_layouts/15/WopiFrame.aspx?sourcedoc=/sites/cas/signssafety/sostools/Harm%20Matrix/Harm%20Worry%20Matrix.docx&action=default

Ask questions to explore everything positive in direct parenting and what has changed since the child / young person became looked after that has allowed us to consider the child / young person returning home.

Gain an understanding of what the child / young person is worried about, what they think is going well in their life and what they would like to happen. My Three Houses or equivalent may be used here.

Speak to any siblings to understand what they may be worried about, what they think is going well and what they would like to happen.

Use this information to create:

- Clear and understandable danger statements informed by what the worries were when the child / young person first came to be looked after and what the impact of this is on the child / young person now (trauma); any current worries, the impact of these on the child / young person and what we worry could happen if the worries don't change

- Clear and understandable safety goal(s) that state what life would need to look like in order for the child / young person to be returned home and children's services to eventually get out of the family's life.
- Bottom lines that need to be adhered to in the safety plan, for example any person or people that the child / young person should not spend time alone with. Networks should be included as a bottom line. Bottom lines should be kept to the minimum required for the plan to be safe, they need to be realistic for each family and they should be shared with the network as part of the safety planning process.
- Scaling questions matched to each danger statement / safety goal that allow us to track progress towards goals

Identify an informed network:

Children and young people who have a network of people looking out for them and who can step in to help when things get difficult tend to do better than children and young people who are isolated. Problems and abuse thrive on shame and secrecy so planning always involves bringing together a natural network of support people who are informed of the worries so that they know what to look out for so that children can be safe and well.

Use tools like mobility mapping / genograms / ecomaps to identify who else is in the parents and child / young person's life, which could include wider family members, friends, neighbours and community resources (e.g. youth clubs, the Voluntary and Community Sector). These are the people who are likely to be involved for the long run and who are available to support when other professionals aren't.

Ask questions to get an understanding of who the most important people are around the parents and the child / young person and how it is that they have helped in the past or can help now. These are the people who can form a network around the parents and the child / young person and take part in conversations and meetings to come up with a plan that keeps the child / young person safe and support the parents to care for their child.

Where the network includes professionals, agree what role professionals will play as part of the rehabilitation plan and include any meetings with professionals as part of your tasks / steps. This could include any additional support for parents and the child / young person to support the reunification, such as parenting programmes and support to help the child / young person to regulate their feelings.

During the preparation phase, agreement should also be gained from the parents and other key people in the child / young person's life, e.g. foster carers, wider family, for a words and pictures explanation for the child / young person to explain to them why it is that they are looked after (if they haven't had this explanation already), what people are worried about and what people are doing to address the worries. The words and pictures explanation will then be worked on during the planning phase of the trajectory.

During the preparation stage if family time is supervised then normally this should continue. The social worker may need to get buy in from the parents and child / young person around this as they may be keen for things to progress quickly however the aim is for a network to be identified and an initial plan devised to address the danger statements and safety goals prior to family time switching to supervision by or support from the network.

In the Family Time section state what the current family time arrangements are at the beginning of the reunification work. Family time (whether supervised or unsupervised) can increase as soon as parents start to buy into the preparation stage as this shows the parents and the child / young person that we are serious about working with them to get their child home and helps to build hope.

If all goes well then progress to:

Planning Stage

Planning should always take place with an informed network of support people and include the child / young person if they are able to contribute. Members of the Family Group Conferencing team can be contacted for advice on running Family Network Meetings or pulling together a Family Group Conference in more complex situations where mediation or lots of preparation is needed to bring the family network together.

Members of the network should be made aware of the purpose of the network meeting prior to coming together so that the meeting has the best chance of success. Where possible, parents should invite members of the network to the Family Network Meeting as this encourages parents to take responsibility for bringing their important people together and deals with the issue of consent. Fail to prepare = prepare to fail as network meetings are likely to be more difficult if this preparation hasn't taken place.

Share the danger statements and safety goals with the network as the focus for the meeting. You can ask scaling questions linked to the danger statement / safety goals to gauge each person's position, what is working well enough for them to give this rating and what they think needs to happen to move up a point on the scale. These are the steps that the network builds on over time so that we are creating safety and success for the child / young person.

The network should create a plan that states what parents, the child / young person and the network will do to make sure that the child / young person is kept safe and well cared for, particularly when the parents may be struggling.

A safety journal (or alternatives like a Whats App group) should be introduced to keep a record of how well the plan is working and how the network respond to any challenges. Children / young people can be empowered to have more control through a safety object or equivalent (e.g. a safety word), where they can move their object or use their word to let a member of the network know that they are worried about something so that person knows that they need to check in with the child / young person.

Once an initial plan has been agreed, any professional supervision of family time can start to switch to the network or if family time is already unsupervised then this can continue with check ins from the network. Family time should increase at this point. This is to build hope for the parents and the child / young person that things are moving on and also gives the opportunity for the plan to be tested out in a manageable way so that any challenges can be addressed and the plan tweaked before moving to overnight stays.

The aim in the planning stage is to build on and strengthen the plan with the network over a series of review meetings. The safety journal should be used to inform what is working and, where there have been any challenges, how the network has overcome these. The plan may need to be tweaked and strengthened in light of any challenges and should consider any 'what ifs' (based on past problems or difficulties) that could occur again in future so that the family network is prepared for this. Safety scales should be used in each review meeting to help measure progress and capture different people's perspectives about what is working well and what still needs to happen.

Planning should always include the child or young person where they are old enough and are able to contribute to this. Tools such as My Safety House can be used to understand who the child does and doesn't feel safe around, who they want to be part of the plan and what it is that they do to help, what they want the rules to be so that they feel safe at home and how well they feel the plan is working. More information on My Safety House can be found at:
http://teams.durham.gov.uk/sites/cas/signssafety/sostools/_layouts/15/start.aspx#/Safety%20House/Forms/AllItems.aspx

During the planning stage, family time should increase so that the parents start to take on increasing responsibility for caring for their child, e.g. parents making sure that their child gets to school, cooking their meals etc. This can take place with a member of the network present or linking in to offer support to the parents and the child / young person. The aim here is to gradually start introducing more responsibilities that may test the parents but to do this in a safe way with the support of their network so that success can be built on and if any worries do arise these can be managed and the plan tweaked if need be. This helps to avoid situations where family time increases too quickly without enough support in place from the network or planning for the 'what ifs', which can then lead to things breaking down if something goes wrong and the plan then goes backwards or stalls.

If all goes well with the increased family time and support from the network then family time can progress to overnight stays, initially with a member of the network present or checking in so that the parents and the child / young person continue to feel supported.

As the plan with the network is tested (fire drilled) and strengthened over a period of weeks, with increased overnight stays and the parents taking on greater responsibility for the care of their child with support from the network, a final version of the plan should be agreed. Fire drills should be built into the plan to test

its effectiveness, e.g. by calling a member of the network late at night to see how they respond; getting the child to move their safety object to see whether anyone in the network notices and responds to this.

The final plan should address any triggers and stressors that make the worries more likely to happen, any signs that things are starting to slip and who will do what if this starts to happen so that the child / young person is kept safe and well now and in the future. The final plan should identify the 'boss' of the plan (normally the strongest member of the network) and it will be their responsibility to make sure that members of the network do as they say they will. All members of the network should be given a copy of the plan by the social worker in a format that best makes sense to them.

Words and Pictures:

During the planning stage, work should commence on a words and pictures explanation for the child / young person so that they understand the story of how they came to be looked after. The words and pictures explanation needs to answer any questions that the child / young person may have about why they don't currently live at home (if this hasn't happened already) and should include input from the key people in the child / young person's life. It is helpful to show parents / carers a 'similar but different' example so that we give them a vision of what we want them to create. Examples of words and pictures can be found on the SOS Knowledge Bank: <https://www.signsofsafety.net/knowledgebank/> and also on the SOS Shared Resource:

<http://teams.durham.gov.uk/sites/cas/signssafety/goodpractice/layouts/15/start.aspx#/Plans%20%20Words%20%20Pictures/Forms/AllItems.aspx>

The social worker works with the family to draft the story using the family's language and presents this to the parents and other important people who are part of the story for them to make any changes. Parents and other important people may want to draft their own story as part of this process and the family should be invited to draw the pictures to accompany the story. These can be simple stick figures so that families are not intimidated by this.

The aim of the words and pictures explanation is to give the child / young person the story of how they came to be looked after which is owned by the parents as this carries more meaning for the child / young person. The story should also celebrate any positives in the family, e.g. the love that exists within families, fond memories of good times together, the family's hopes and dreams etc. Where there is a difference of opinion, this can be stated in the story. A good words and pictures story won't shame or blame families and can be a therapeutic experience. When the words and pictures has been agreed by the parents, the story is then read / shared by the parents to the child / young person and the network so that everyone is clear about the story.

It is helpful to share this explanation with the child / young person prior to progressing to overnight stays as this represents an important bridge in helping the child / young person to make sense of what has happened in their life and what the next steps will be (e.g. the parents, child / young person and the network will

work together to come up with a plan that means it is safe enough for the child / young person to return home).

A words and pictures explanation of the final plan should be shared with the child / young person prior to them being reunited with their family. This will let the child / young person know who is doing what in order to keep them safe and well and sets the scene for the monitoring stage. The plan may include actions for the child / young person themselves, e.g. where they have chosen a safety object.

If all has gone well, the final safety plan has been developed and tested and the words and pictures explanation of the plan has been shared with the child / young person then the child / young person should be reunited with their family.

Monitoring Stage

During the monitoring period, the focus is on gradually transferring all of the responsibility for the care and safety of the child / young person back to the network. This process can start by having the 'boss' of the plan lead on network meetings when the social worker is also present.

It will then become the network's responsibility to call the network together if there are worries in the future. If the network is unable to resolve the worries then they should contact the social worker for advice. Any statutory meetings will continue to run alongside this and key members of the network may wish to attend these meetings.

The network should continue to use and test out the plan and review this in their network meetings, using the safety journal to guide their thinking and strengthening the plan as needed.

If all continues to go well, then a celebration event can be held to include the parents, child / young person and the network to honour the family's efforts and to officially end Children's Social Care involvement.

3. Checklist

In preparing for the child / young person to return home, social workers should also consider the following as part of their planning:

- Is the family home ready for the child / young person to return, e.g. they have a bedroom, there is safety equipment in place for any young or disabled children, the family have the necessary white goods that they need to care for the child, the house is furnished well enough for the child, any hazards have been cleared.
- School and nursery / playgroup arrangements are in place, introductions have taken place and parents are aware of who the key people are that they need to be in touch with regarding their child

- Finances, e.g. applying for benefits, support to manage any debt, whether the family needs help with a one-off purchase for equipment
- Transport arrangements for family time (this should include how the network will help out once the network plan is in place)
- Attendance at important appointments, e.g. health
- Information from carers about daily routines/favourite toys/what works is shared with parents and the network
- Arrangements for clubs/hobbies/activities/keeping in contact with friends
- Care Team and Family Network to ensure that the reunification plan is coordinated so that everyone is clear about who is doing what to avoid confusion, prevent tasks being duplicated and to be clear about which professionals are visiting the home or supervising family time prior to this being taken over by the family network
- Consideration given to a consultation with Full Circle where families may benefit from therapeutic support as part of the plan