A picture containing calendar

Description automatically generated

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |
| Sheffield City Council  Fostering Service  **Policy on Unannounced Visits to Foster Carers**  January 2023 |  |

1. **Legal Framework**

## The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services

3.82 Every foster home must be visited without appointment by a supervising social worker of the fostering service at least once a year, as a check on the standard of care being provided (standard 10).

5.67. It is the supervising social worker’s role to supervise the foster carer’s work, to ensure that they are meeting the child’s needs, and to offer support and a framework to assess the foster carer’s performance and develop their skills. They must make regular visits to the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year.

## National Minimum Standard 10: Providing a suitable physical environment for the Foster Child

10.5 The foster home is inspected annually, without appointment, by the fostering service to make sure that it continues to meet the needs of foster children.

## National Minimum Standard 21: Support and Supervision of Foster Carers

21.8 Each approved foster carer is supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker who has meetings with the foster carer, including at least one unannounced visit a year.

1. **Sheffield City Council’s procedure**

## Frequency and Purpose of Unannounced Visits

The fostering social worker must ensure that they complete a minimum of one unannounced visit to all foster carers, including those who are ‘on hold’ or have no child placed with them, within every 12-month period. Additional unannounced visits should be considered if there are concerns about the standards of care or as part of an action plan agreed with carers.

Foster carers are not able to refuse to have unannounced visits as part of their employment. This would only be appropriate in exceptional circumstances agreed by a team manager.

The main purpose of these visits is for the fostering social worker to check that the home environment that the child/young person is living in is of a good enough standard and consistent with the rest of the home. It will include checking who is looking after the child/young person, who is in the home and if the carer is not at home, what arrangements have been made for the care of the child/young person.

## The Visit

All unannounced visits will take place between the hours of 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. any day of the week (however, it is anticipated that most visits will take place during Monday to Friday).

When Task or Permanence carers have a child in placement, the fostering social worker will try to plan their unannounced visit so that the child is seen during the visit. This will allow the fostering social worker to observe the relationship between the foster carer(s) and the child/young person and speak to the child/young person about how they are getting on in the fostering household. When the child is not present, but their foster carer is, the fostering social worker will still look around the house and will record this as an unannounced visit; the social worker will then arrange to see the child/young person during their next announced visit. As it is good practice to see the child/young person during an unannounced visit, the social worker may also choose to attempt another unannounced visit to see the child with the carer within the original 12-month period. If there are concerns about the carer’s standards of care, the fostering social worker’s team manager may decide that the child must be seen during the unannounced visit; they will record their decision on the carer’s LCS record.

While an effort should be made by the fostering social worker to complete an unannounced home visit to Holiday and Support foster carers at the time when they are supporting a child/young person subject to agreed care arrangements, this may not always be practical or in the child/young person’s best interest. As such, it will be a decision of the fostering social worker’s manager on whether to attempt to see the supported child during the unannounced home visit or not.

When there are two carers in one household, one or both need to be present during the unannounced visit.

During the unannounced visit, the foster child’s bedroom and any communal spaces available to the child such as bathroom, kitchen, living room, garden and outbuildings must be seen. If it is not possible for the fostering social worker to see all these areas and undertake appropriate checks, a further unannounced visit needs to be completed. As it is good practice to fully observe the child’s living environment, the fostering social worker should also seek consent to see the rest of the house such as the carer’s bedroom or bedrooms of birth children to establish household consistency and who is in the home. The fostering social worker should explain the reason for the request and be clear that it is not about whether bedrooms are tidy and that the social worker will not be reading personal documents or going through personal possessions. The fostering social worker will not proceed with viewing these if the consent is not given but may express concerns that it is not given. If there are concerns about the carer’s standards of care or home conditions, the fostering social worker’s team manager may decide that the whole house must be seen during the unannounced visit even if consent was not originally granted; they will record their decision on the carer’s Liquid Logic (LL) record.

When possible, the fostering social worker should be checking that standards are consistent throughout the home e.g. bedrooms for looked after children are of the same standard as other bedrooms within the foster home.

Although it is not necessary to complete a full health and safety during the unannounced visits, consideration should be given to issues of health and safety. For example, are windows and doors locked, (when appropriate) are the stairgates and fire guards in place?

Any issues should be addressed during the visit and checked on the next visit.

If a babysitter or back up carer is looking after the child, the fostering social worker will seek to identify the person looking after the child/young person but if neither of the foster carers are at home, the unannounced visit should not continue. If the foster child/young person is home alone, the unannounced visit should not continue but the fostering social worker will still need to check when their foster carer or other safe adult is due to be back home. Should the fostering social worker identify any safeguarding concerns about the child/young person being home alone, they will address them straight away.

If neither of the foster carers is at home, the fostering social worker should leave a note for them to say that they have visited.

An unannounced visit will not replace an announced supervision visit unless the foster carer agrees to it at the time and all the requirements for a full supervision visit are covered during the unannounced visit.

## Recording

The fostering social worker will record all unannounced visit that fulfill the requirements set above on the carer’s Liquid Logic (LL) record, using a *'Supervision Visit to Foster Carer(s) Unannounced*’ form.

No unannounced visit can be recorded as complete unless:

* One or both foster carers is present.
* The foster child’s bedroom and any communal spaces available to the child are inspected.

If the team manager decides that the foster child/young person needs to be present and/or the whole house needs to be inspected, the unannounced visit will not be recorded as complete unless these conditions are met.

Any attempted visits which do not meet all the requirements set above (e.g. the child’s bedroom was not seen; the foster carer was not present) will be recorded on the carer’s LL record as a case note, using the ‘Foster Carer Additional Visit’ title.

The fostering social worker will give a physical record of the completed visit form to the foster carer during their next supervision visit, or send it to them via secure email beforehand, and they will record that they have done so. The social worker will also record any carer’s comments and disagreements about the content of the visit form.

Team managers, as part of the fostering social worker’s supervision, should track unannounced visits and discuss whether there have been any issues arising from them. Outcomes of unannounced visits will be part of the foster carers’ annual review.