## Newcastle Children’s Social Care

## Returning Children to Their Families Procedure

**SCOPE OF THIS CHAPTER**

This chapter provides guidance on the actions Newcastle CSC staff should take:

* In developing and implementing plans to reunite children in care with their parents or wider network.
* In responding and supporting children and families when children return to their parents’ care in an unplanned manner

**INTRODUCTION**

Social workers, managers and IROs must ensure that the plans in place for a child remain appropriate to need. Regular updated assessments are essential to explore if a child’s needs, or his / her family / network’s ability to meet them have changed. If there is a need to change a child’s care plan, including the possibility of reunification, this must be considered at a Statutory Review to ensure updated plans can be agreed and implemented at the earliest opportunity.

Newcastle CSC recognises the importance of family relationships in promoting the welfare and best interests of children. Wherever possible, and where this is in a child’s best interests, CSC staff must work with parents and members of the family network to help maintain positive relationships for children in care. Working in this way should mean that we have an up to date understanding of the role parents and others within the network can play in delivering a comprehensive care plan for a child, including the possibility of reunification. In that sense our work on reunification starts before a child enters care, when we first establish a positive working relationship with the child, their parents and wider network members.

**BACKGROUND**

Reunifying children is a particularly challenging time for children, parents, and families. There is always risk that reunification plans may not succeed, and children may need to return into the care system. National research suggests that almost half of children who returned home were readmitted to care (47%). As such, great care is required in developing reunification plans. It is essential that there is a clear understanding of each child’s needs and the capacity of his / her parents / network members to meet their needs. This means we must also have a robust understanding of the parents’ needs and any support they will require in caring for their child.

**FAMILY GROUP CONFERENCING (FGC)** [FGC Procedures HERE](https://proceduresonline.com/trixcms2/media/9847/family-group-conference-procedure-newcastle-final-july-2021.docx)

The use of relational and restorative practice is central to Newcastle’s work with children, families, and networks. When reunification has been identified as a plan CSC is exploring for a child or where a child returns home in an unplanned way (i.e. parents withdraw s.20 consent or older children ‘vote with their feet’), the allocated social worker must notify the FGC Service so that a FGC can be offered to the family / network. This is the most effective way to bring family networks together and explore the role that they can play in promoting the welfare of children. If there is an existing Family Plan in place, it may be necessary to review this with the family to ensure it addresses the possibility of reunification. The objective is to ensure there is clarity about the family network and its resources, and how they will support the reunification plan or reality should a child have already returned home.

**NSPCC MODEL**

In response to national research findings the NSPCC and University of Bristol developed a Reunification Practice Framework and associated guidance to assist social workers to improve assessment, decision-making and planning and support for children and parents in relation to their return home from care.

The guidance supports social workers to apply structured professional judgement to decisions about whether and how a child should return home from care. It provides a framework for analysing risks to the child based on robust evidence, which enhances the worker’s professional judgement. It supports families and workers to understand what needs to change, to set goals, access support and services and to review progress.

The framework can be used with all children and young people up to the age of 18 who have been taken into care because of abuse and neglect for whom return home is an option. It is relevant when children are placed under S20 and to those on care and interim care orders. Cases will be eligible to consider within this framework when a child has recently come into care and when a child has been in care for longer and the possibility of reunification is being considered. More detailed guidance can be accessed here: [Reunification: an evidence-informed framework for return home practice (nspcc.org.uk)](https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/1095/reunification-practice-framework-guidance.pdf) Newcastle’s expectation is that before using the NSPCC model staff should complete relevant training which is available via iLearn LMS.

**CHILDREN SUBJECT TO A CARE ORDER**

There are established statutory regulations directing what must happen when a child that is subject to a care order returns home. The actions required are set out in the [Placements with Parents procedure (PWP)](https://newcastlechildcare.proceduresonline.com/p_place_with_parents.html) . The regulations require a thorough assessment of the parents' ability to care for their child and promote their best interests. There is clear direction regarding how the plan will be established and monitored to manage any identified risk and to promote the safety of the child.

The decision to establish a plan to return a child to his/her parents will be addressed through the Placement with Parents (PWP) assessment and the plan will be considered through the statutory review process. This should ensure that there is a full understanding of the child’s needs and parents’ ability to meet them. The involvement of the IRO, in chairing the statutory review process, ensures there is opportunity to evaluate plans and challenge them should they not be comprehensive, or should any party consider that the plan is not in the child’s best interest. Any assessment and plan completed as part of PWP must address the impact on the child when their long-term care plan has changed.

The reunification SW in CIC / Care Leavers Service will complete the PWP assessment and support plan. It is essential that the PWP assessment and support plan are completed when children have return to their parents’ care in an unplanned manner, i.e. where an older child chooses to return home, when this was not their agreed plan and they cannot be safely returned to local authority care.

**CHILDREN ACCOMMODATED UNDER S.20**

The scope of the section includes children for whom there was an agreed plan of accommodation by the local authority. That is a plan that was confirmed through the statutory review process. Children who were accommodated briefly, and for whom a plan of accommodation was never approved, may still require support to secure a return to their parents’ care. However, these children should be supported through plans agreed at the point at which accommodation began, which must focus on returning the child to their parents' care.

For children accommodated under s.20, a Child and Family Assessment must be completed before a plan to reunify a child can be agreed or implemented. The assessment must explore all aspects of need, including those of the child, those of any other children living at home and the support parents will need to meet the identified needs of the child/ren. The initial plan to explore reunification must be considered at a Statutory Review and the Child and Family Assessment and any proposed support plan must be considered at a subsequent Statutory Review before the plan is implemented. The support plan must consider all identified needs, including those of the child, parents and sibling already living at home covered in the assessment.

Should a child accommodated under s.20 return home in an unplanned manner (i.e. by the young person ‘voting with their feet’) it is essential that a Child and Family Assessment is completed at the earliest point to inform the development of the support plan. As noted above, by continuing to work with parents and wider networks, after children have entered care, CSC staff should have good working relationships and a strong sense of what parents and others can provide for the child. This will help determine if any action is required to safeguard the child in this scenario, or whether a good enough standard of care can be provided with support.

When a child ceases to be accommodated in an unplanned manner, and this is against the agreed plan, the allocated social worker must seek legal advice.

**SERVICES TO BE CONSIDERED AS PART OF A REUNIFICATION PLAN**

Support plans must consider the period of preparation for reunification, any ‘testing out’ period as well as post reunification support. For example, in preparation for reunification there will be a need to consider the use of family time and how family time plans may be increased to support reunification.

Support plans must be based on identified need and be designed to minimise the risk of breakdown and the need for the child to return into care. The support plan must include the frequency with which the child will be visited at home (see visit schedule [HERE](https://newcastlechildcare.proceduresonline.com/contents.html) Children being reunified may require edge of care support services including MST (Standard), Community Fostering, CIC Resource Workers and a range of other services provided or commissioned by social care to Children in Care or Children in Need. The plan should, where appropriate be informed by the NSPCC model and be considered in a multi-agency forum to ensure aspects of health, education and social care need are fully addressed. The proposed plan will need to be authorised by a Team Manager before being considered at the Statutory Review.

Foster carers may play a significant role in the success of a child’s reunification from foster care. This includes actions taken to support a child and parents through the implementation stage and following reunification. The relationship between the child and former foster carers may be of great significance to the child (and the carers) and this must be considered.

For any child, whether reunified via PWP or following s.20 accommodation, any decision by CSC to close the case (following revocation of the Care Order in PWP cases) will require consideration of the need to establish an Early Help Plan around the child and family.

**VISITS TO THE CHILD(REN)**

Newcastle CSC has **mandatory** guidance for social work visits [HERE](https://newcastlechildcare.proceduresonline.com/contents.html) This provides direction on minimum frequency; however, visits must be in line with individual needs and circumstances. If the allocated social worker is unable to complete a scheduled visit, the relevant manager must ensure the visit is completed by another qualified social worker. The visits must comply with the frequency set out in the visiting guidance and comprise both planned and unplanned visits. The visits must include speaking with the child alone, seeing their bedroom and ensuring the environment remains suitable. The visits will also explore the efficacy of the support plan and whether the plan needs to be amended.

Following statutory visit, a statutory visit report must be completed, which identifies:

* The child's wishes and feelings about the return home.
* The parent or carer's view of how the return home is progressing and any views of siblings particularly in relation to changed dynamics in the home.
* Whether any additional support or services are required to enable the child to remain safely at home; and
* Whether the child's welfare is being adequately safeguarded and promoted.

In the event of concern regarding the child’s welfare, the social worker should report this to their line manager, who will in turn discuss this with their Service Manager.

For clarity – the above applies to children subject to PWP Regulations and to Children that have returned home a following having had an agreed plan to be accommodated under s.20.

**REVIEWING AND MONITORING THE PLAN**

If a child is subject to PWP regulations, they will remain a child in care and their plans will be subject to statutory reviews (<https://newcastlechildcare.proceduresonline.com/p_look_aft_rev.html>). A Statutory Review must have been held to agree the reunification plan and future reviews can be timetabled to occur at an agreed point after the reunification has been achieved. Statutory Reviews can be brought forward to suit the individual needs of the child and family but must happen within a 6-month period as a minimum. Any decision to revoke the Care Order and end the child’s legal status as a Child in Care, will require an updated assessment and consideration at a statutory review.

Children that were accommodated under s.20 will no longer be children in care, following reunification. However, these children will remain as Children in Need (subject to consent) and there will be regular reviews of the CIN Plan. The first review should happen within 3 months of the reunification and then at least every 6 months. The review of CIN plans will continue up until the point a decision is made that the child’s case can be closed to CSC. This decision requires an updated Child and Family Assessment and must consider the potential need for an Early Help Plan or other universal supports.

All children’s plans will also be monitored via regular Care Team meetings. The first Care Team should meet within 2 weeks of the reunification and then at a minimum of 4 weeks whilst the case is open to CSC.

**RATIFYING THE DECISIONS**

When a child returns home, having been accommodated under s.20, the decision must be approved by a named senior manager. This includes children who returned home, on an unplanned basis. As well as considering any assessments, the nominated officer\*, usually Head of Service or a Deputy Director, will need to be satisfied that the child’s wishes and feelings have been considered and that appropriate consultation had taken place with the key adults in the child's life including the child's relatives (where appropriate) and other appropriate persons such as Foster carer or registered manager of the children's home and the child’s IRO.

For children subject to PWP Regulations the assessment and plan must be approved by the Deputy Director.

\*Nominated officer is defined in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2012 as a senior officer of the responsible authority nominated in writing by the director of children’s services for the purposes of these Regulations)

**End**