**Social Visits (Including Overnight Stays)**

**Scope Of This Chapter**

This policy and procedure applies to Looked After Children placed in foster homes in relation to social visits and where overnight stays with friends are planned.

For the procedure relating to contact with family members and those with parental responsibility see: [**Family Time with Parents/Adults and Siblings Procedure**](https://bradfordchildcare.proceduresonline.com/p_contact_parents.html).

**Relevant Guidance**

[**National Minimum Standard 9 (Fostering Services) - Promoting and Supporting Contact**](http://www.minimumstandards.org/fost_nine.html)

**Related Chapters**

[**Delegation of Authority to Foster Carers and Residential Workers Procedure**](https://bradfordchildcare.proceduresonline.com/p_del_auth_fc_resid.html)

[**Holidays and School Trips In and Outside of the UK Procedure**](https://bradfordchildcare.proceduresonline.com/p_hol_trips_in_out_uk.html)

1. **Introduction**

*Looked after children say that problems obtaining parents' and local authorities' consent to everyday activities can make them feel different from their peers, causing them embarrassment and upset. It is therefore very important to agree upfront who can make which decisions about a looked after child, and that this is understood by all key parties and reviewed regularly.*

*The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations - Volume 4: Fostering Services.*

Decisions on social visits and overnight stays should normally be delegated to foster carers and residential care staff. The arrangements for such decisions should be written into the Placement Plan in line with the Care Plan taking account of any relevant court directives.

When the child's placement is made, information regarding significant relationships and friendships should be obtained as part of this process and should be reviewed as appropriate.

The parents' views on social visits and overnight stays with friends should also be obtained. For procedures on Parental Consent, see [**Section 3, Parental Consent**](https://bradfordchildcare.proceduresonline.com/p_overnigt_stays.htm?zoom_highlight=Social+visits+overnight+stays#parental).

The Placement Plan should include the parameters within which visits or stays away from the home with friends may be agreed by the carer without prior consultation with the social worker, and whether agreement to such visits requires the carer to obtain parental consent. The Plan may state that the social worker and/or parent must always be consulted.

The guiding principle is that looked after children should, as far as possible, be given the same permission to take part in normal and acceptable age-appropriate activities, such as staying with friends, as would reasonably be granted by the parents of their peers. Judgment should depend on the assessed risks to and needs of the child. See also [**Delegation of Authority to Foster Carers and Residential Workers Procedure**](https://bradfordchildcare.proceduresonline.com/p_del_auth_fc_resid.html).

**2. Social Visits/Overnight Stays**

The delegation of authority to approve a child making social visits to friends should be set out in the Placement Plan and delegated authority tool, which must be consistent with the child's Care Plan. The arrangements must also be consistent with any Contact Orders in force in favour of relatives and/or friends.

Overnight stays with friends are a regular part of most children/young people's experience and often occur at short notice. It is neither practicable nor desirable to carry out police and other formal checks on the adult’s resident in the friend's household, unless of course there are particular reasons for concern.

Although agency checks are not normally be required as a precondition of a child staying overnight with friends, in circumstances where it is considered necessary as a result of specific risks identified in the risk assessment, or where the child is to stay with adults regularly or frequently or for a prolonged period, checks on members of the relevant household should be made through the Disclosure and Barring Service, the Children's Services and Probation records for the relevant area.

Where there are exceptional reasons to require carers to seek the permission of the social worker, a manager or a parent, or place specific restrictions on permitting a child to stay overnight with friends, this should be because of reasons necessary to safeguard the child's welfare. The child's wishes should be taken into account in reaching any such decision.

Any such restriction, together with the reasons, should be clearly recorded in the Placement Plan, and explained to the child where appropriate. Restrictions should be reviewed regularly to ensure they remain relevant.

In the majority of cases, it will be sensible for decision making about sleepovers to be delegated to the child/young person's carer who will be best placed to know or find out about the friend and monitor the frequency of sleepover visits.

Carers considering a request from a child to stay overnight with a friend should base their decision on the following factors:

* Are there any relevant restrictions in the child's Placement Plan?
* Are there any factors in the child's past experiences or behaviour to preclude overnight stays?
* Are there any grounds for concern that the child may be at significant risk in the household concerned or from the activities proposed?
* Is the child staying with another child or children, rather than staying solely with an adult?
* The age and level of understanding of the child.
* What is the purpose and length of the overnight stay?
* Whose idea was the overnight stay?
* How well is the friend or family known to the child?

Where the carer proposes to agree to the child's stays away, before allowing them to go ahead, certain enquiries must be made by the carer; for example the name of the adult who will be responsible for the child, the means of contacting the adult and the child during the visit/stay and the arrangements for the child's return. There should be clarity about the sleeping arrangements and what the arrangements are.

Prior to the child's stay away, the carer should arrange to meet the adult who will have responsibility for the child unless he or she is already known in which case the prior arrangements can be made over the telephone.

The arrangements for supervising or caring for the child must not compromise the safety of the child or that of anyone else; and the following considerations should apply:

* Have the arrangements been confirmed with the parent of the friend or the adult who will have responsibility during the visit?
* What are the arrangements for the child returning to the home?
* Is there a contact number for the household in which the child will stay?
* Is the child aware of what to do if he or she wants to return to the home earlier than planned?
* Does the child have a contact number for the carers where they can be reached at any time?
* Does the child have access to a mobile phone?

In all cases, discussions should be held with the child, dependent on his or her age, as to what, if any, information should be shared with other adults to enable them to look after the child appropriately.

This might include:

* Any specific health care needs of the child.
* Any established routines for the child.
* Any behaviour management problems which, if the adult is unaware of, could lead to difficulties during the visit, for example the child may be over familiar with adults or over assertive with younger children.

Any decision to share information should be on a 'need to know' basis and recorded.

If the child refuses to allow appropriate information to be shared, then he or she needs to be made aware that this could affect the decision to allow the stay away from home.

If satisfied that it is appropriate to allow the child's stay away, a decision to allow it to go ahead may be made.

The decision and the arrangements agreed should be recorded in full in the child's Daily Record where the child is placed in foster care.

Even if it has been agreed that the social worker does not have to be consulted in making these arrangements, s/he must still be informed as soon as practicable afterwards (within 1 working day) and the social worker should inform the parents as appropriate.

With older teenagers, there may be a greater risk to their safety and wellbeing as they explore and test greater levels of independence. This applies to young people living at home as well as to those who are looked after by a Local Authority and it is inevitable that in some cases, despite the care taken, things will go wrong.

It is the intention of this procedure to protect children and young people and to carry out our duty as reasonable and responsible parents. It is also intended to enable carers and social workers to demonstrate that if something goes wrong, they have taken all reasonable precautions to protect the child and young person.

**3. Parental Consent**

Wherever possible, parents' views and consent to contact with relatives and friends including any overnight stays away from the home should be obtained by the social worker at the time of the placement.

These views should be recorded including an indication of whether the parent wishes to be notified or their consent obtained every time an overnight stay takes place and if so, whether such consultation and prior consent is required before the contact can go ahead.

It should also be clearly recorded if parents do not consent to any continuing relationships or short stays away from the home, and the reasons for their lack of consent should be obtained.

If it is considered that contact is appropriate despite the parents' views, legal advice may be required and any decision to allow such contact needs to be clearly recorded together with reasons and explained to the parents.