**Surrey Fostering Service**

 **Back Up Carer Assessment Practice Guidance**

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1. Purpose

It is expected that when family and friends of foster carers are involved in undertaking a caring role in relation to looked after children, some assessment of these friends or relatives takes place.

This practice guidance outlines Surrey County Council’s process for undertaking assessment of “back up carers” as well as seeking to clarify the difference between certain caring arrangements that may be used to support children.

The Fostering Network Guidance acknowledges that along with support from fostering services, foster carers own support networks are crucial, and will often be considered as part of a fostering assessment. Formalising of ‘support carer’ systems is not a regulatory requirement, but determined by local practice and procedure.

The Fostering Network also notes that across England, fostering services use a range of terms including; support carer, back up carer, nominated babysitter. The term used throughout this guidance is back up carer.

2. Babysitters

All foster carers may have a friend or relative who helps them day to day; for example caring for a child for a few hours whilst the foster carer attends a meeting, or looking after a child in the evening so the foster carer can go out to training, or for a meal with friends. This would be considered babysitting by the fostering service. No checks are needed on babysitters, as foster carers can make these arrangements under delegated authority. However, the expectation is that a babysitter is over eighteen years old, and the foster carer should be confident that the person they ask to babysit knows the looked after child, and can meet their needs.

Babysitters may be used occasionally for an overnight stay, however if a child was being cared for by someone regularly, or for a length of time more than one night, then this person would usually need to be a back up carer.

3. Back up carers

The use of a back up carer means that a child can remain within the foster carers own network. This is important as looked after children do not wish to feel different to their peers; many object to staying with respite foster carers for this reason. Arranging for a child to stay with a back up carer is a similar arrangement to that which parents may make for their own children.

The foster carer, for the time that the back up carer is looking after the child, retains responsibility for the child. They should be available to be contacted on the phone in an emergency, as parents would be, if their child was being cared for by a friend or family member.

Back up carers do not need to be approved as foster carers in order to care for looked after children. Paragraph 3.23 of the guidance states:

*“There is no requirement that where a looked after child* *visits or spends a holiday with their foster carer’s friends or relative that the individual must be approved as a local authority foster carer, as the child will remain formally placed with their usual foster carers”.*

The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services (2011)

If foster carers are arranging for a child to stay with their back up carers overnight they should inform the supervising social worker and child’s social worker, so they are aware that the child is in a different place overnight. If it has been arranged in an emergency, or outside of working hours, the social workers should be notified as soon as is practically possible.

The main focus for foster carers when considering making alternative care arrangements for children, should be the child’s welfare, and that no looked after child is subjected to multiple alternative carers. When deciding if a child should stay overnight with back up carers, or have a trip or holiday with them, foster carers should consider the following:

* Would anything in the child’s care plan, or agreements made as part of court proceedings, prevent or restrict this arrangement
* What has been discussed at the placement planning meeting, in terms of the child’s past experiences of overnight stays
* How long the stay will be, and the reason for it
* The age and level of understanding of the child; wherever possible the child’s views should be sought
* Is there any risk in relation to the child staying with the back up carer, and if so, what is the safety plan

4. Assessment and Review of Back up Carers

The use of back up carers should be discussed as part of any fostering assessment of prospective carers. Where this is the case, a back up carer assessment report should be written by the assessing social worker and presented to the fostering panel, along with the rest of the fostering assessment.

Once foster carers are approved, it is important they keep their supervising social worker up to date with regards to their support network and back up carers. This information should be included as part of the Annual Household Review. If back up carers can no longer support the foster carer, for whatever reason, and a new back up carer is identified, a back up carer assessment report should be completed in relation to them, by the foster carers supervising social worker. This will not be presented to panel, but signed off by the Fostering Service Manager.

The back up carer assessment needs to be proportionate, to ensure that those used as back up carers are appropriate to care for children, but that the assessment is not so onerous as to prevent people committing to it. It will include:

* Two personal references taken up with regards to the carer(s) suitability to look after children
* A health and safety check of their accommodation
* DBS checks on all adults in the household

One home visit should be undertaken by the assessing/supervising social worker. Practical matters regarding the home should be discussed, along with safer caring, confidentiality, and the offer of training being made available to the back up carer should they want it. The back up carer assessment report template provides guidance on what to cover in this visit.

5. Visiting

As the foster carer will effectively delegate the care of the child to the back up carer for short periods, but remains responsible for the child, the supervising social worker will not routinely visit the child during their stays. However, the back up carer should be made aware that either the supervising social worker or the child’s social worker may visit during a stay, either announced or unannounced, and the expectation is that they are accommodating of this.

6. Allegations

As back up carers are not foster carers, they will not be given membership of the Fostering network including their legal cover. Should there be an allegation made in relation to a back up carer, any guidance and advice would be provided by the Fostering Service.

7. Finance

Any financial support provided to a back up carer would come from the foster carer, who would use part of the child’s allowance (for example towards food, activities etc.) All children in foster care must be given pocket money weekly, so if a stay is for a week or longer, the foster carer must ensure that they provide pocket money, either directly to the child, or to the back up carer to pass on to the child on the appropriate day.

8. Storing or Information

The Back up carer will be given a copy of their assessment for their records and a copy will be securely stored on the main carers electronic file in the section marked confidential third party information. The back up carers assessment will not be shared with anyone without prior consent.

Guidance Referred to in this document

The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 4: Fostering Services. Available online at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/274220/Children_Act_1989_fostering_services.pdf>

The Fostering Network Practice Information (Support Networks)

Available online at:

<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/practice-information/support-networks-foster-carers/support-networks-foster-carers>