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**Unannounced Visit Practice Guidance for Children with Disability residing in residential placement.**

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Background

In 2021, Ofsted closed a number of educational residential settings within the Hesley Group, this prompted an investigation called Operation Lemur Alpha, led by Doncaster Children Services and South Yorkshire Police to respond to the scale of the enquiry.

A national safeguarding practice review into safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs residing in residential settings took place where all Local Authorities were asked to review the children living in similar circumstances. Surrey’s review found children who resided away from home in those settings are well cared for, not experiencing harmful care, and have mechanisms in place to implement appropriate safeguards. However, the overall learning from what took place in Doncaster tells us that creating more opportunities to be curious and quality assure the environment where a child lives is an important part of our role.

Unannounced visits are important and essential to safeguarding the ongoing welfare of our children in residential placements. The rationale for the initiation of this Practice Guidance is to improve our professional curiosity and increase confidence in the Social Work role to monitor and quality assure care provided to our most vulnerable children.

An unannounced visit by an allocated social worker is quality assurance activity bespoke to an individual child and improves our ability to critical reflect on the child’s needs being met as you see them without the residential planning for the visit. Gateway to resources also conduct quality assurance visits to residential placements but these cover broader elements of the contractual arrangements and can be found on a child’s file (in Wisdom) when they take place. It is imperative that there is communication between operational teams and Gateway when quality assurance visits take place. Independent Regulation 44 reports are also submitted to the Local Authority and saved to allow Gateway to Resources, Allocated Social Workers and Independent Reviewing Officers to review and act when concerns are raised about the environment or management of care within a residential setting.

When should discussion around the Unannounced Visit begin?

The discussion around the responsible authority’s need to undertake unannounced visits to the young person with complex heath needs placed away from home in a residential setting should begin at the initial stage of the placement when the Placement Planning meeting is taking place.

Placement Planning meetings should be convened as part of the process of identifying and placing a child/young person as set out in the [**Placements in Residential Care Policy**](https://birminghamcs.proceduresonline.com/p_place_resi_care.html).

The first Placement Planning Meeting needs to be held **within 5 working** days of the start of the placement to ensure that each young person has a Placement Plan that clearly outlines all the expectations. The Placement Plan should clearly outline the expectations and agreement reached around **unannounced visit**.

Who should be part of the placement planning meeting when a young person with complex health needs is placed in a residential setting?

* Social Worker as the lead professional and /or other professional associated with the child e.g. Personal Adviser, Team Manager or advocate.
* Parents.
* Representative of the residential placement, young person’s key worker, link worker and where appropriate the home manager.
* Young person’s advocate.
* Young person.
* Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) practitioner (if appropriate)
* Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) (if possible and appropriate).
* Representative from Health (if appropriate)
* Representative from Commissioning if appropriate.

****Frequency of Looked After Visits

(See [Social Work visits to Looked after Children Policy](https://www.proceduresonline.com/surrey/cs/p_sw_visits.html))

It is good practice that when a Looked After young person with complex health needs is placed, they should ideally be accompanied by the Social Worker to the placement. Following this the young person's social worker must visit the young person in the placement at the following intervals:

* Social Worker to undertake the first CLA visit to the child/young person **within a week** of the child/young person’s placement within a residential placement.
* Subsequent visits to be completed at least **every 6 weeks** during the first year of the placement.
* For a young person in a long-term residential placement, social worker visits can be reduced to **every 12 weeks** only if the child/young person has been within the same placement for over a year and the decision has been agreed at the young person’s looked after review meeting.

This means a young person who is in a long-term residential placement will be visited at least 4 times a year, and 1 of these visits should be an unannounced visit to the residential placement.

These are minimum requirements and the Child Looked After Review may recommend more frequent visits. Frequency of visits should always be determined by the circumstances of the child and visits should be made whenever reasonably requested by the child or residential placement regardless of the status of the placement.

In addition, the young person’s social worker should visit:

* Whenever reasonably requested to do so.
* Immediately after a complaint is received from the young person or from another person relating to the young person concerning the standard of care they are receiving; and/or
* If there is any proposal to remove the young person from placement where concerns have been raised about his/her welfare.

**** When an Unannounced Visit should be considered?

Children and young people who spend long periods of time living away from home in residential settings are a vulnerable group. They can be vulnerable to abuse and may experience a range of poor outcomes as highlighted within the findings from Operation Lemur Alpha. A minimum of **one unannounced** visit as part of our yearly routine visits to the young person’s placement needs to be incorporated as per to the **National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services (2011)** in England. Although this is mainly for fostering services, Surrey County Council is extending this practice to residential placements for children with complex learning and health needs given the findings from the national review.

At least **one unannounced visit** is to be undertaken **a year,** but this **can be increased in frequency** especially where there are safeguarding concerns. If it is decided to increase frequency of the unannounced visits, social workers have the power to do so. They may or may not advise the residential placement about the increase, especially if there are safeguarding concerns around the care given to the young person.

In the event there are increased numbers of incident reports, or when there is suspicion around the use or implementation of the behavioral or communication support plans there may be consideration given for more unannounced visits.

The purpose of the unannounced visit is to ensure that our children residing away from home in residential placement are consistently well cared for, not experiencing harmful care, and that there are mechanisms in place for the Local Authority to implement appropriate safeguards.

The Independent Reviewing Officer can be informed in advance of an unannounced visit, but the education residential setting should not be informed in advance. The need to complete an unannounced visit can be discussed within the review process as this would have already been agreed within the placement plan.

What Needs to be done during an Unannounced Visit?

Unannounced visits must take place for reasons of safeguarding and quality of care. During such visits, practitioners will monitor quality; which will allow the worker to be more professionally curious in what they see, what they read and what they are told. An unannounced visit can be undertaken even if the child is not present, although it cannot be considered a statutory visit. The key actions below are still important even if the child is not there as it can provide us with vital information to support on-going professional curiosity and decision-making.

Key actions can include but not all points required: (CwD (CLA) visit template cover the points below)

* Speak to all relevant and available staff who support your young person.
* Review up to date Risk Assessment – when was it last reviewed by the setting and by whom?
* Review Behavioral support/management plan and implementation – Are staffing levels appropriate and in line with the child/young person’s care plan? Have any incidents taken place that link to concerns for their privacy, liberty, and autonomy?
* Review Communication Plan and implementation. – What are the appropriate communication aids and tools identified to support? Is it differentiated depending on the child/young person’s presentation?
* Monitor incident reports - Incidents are logged and shared in a timely manner with the family and key professionals (Social Workers, Independent Reviewing Officer). When needed those are thoroughly investigated and referral made to LADO accordingly.
  + Prior to your unannounced visit, check the child/young person’s records to confirm the number of known incidents in our records.
* Review key information and contact details – Do they have accurate basic information for the child/young person easily accessible in case of an emergency?
* See where medication is stored and medication logbook – Is it secured in a safe and locked cabinet? Is it administered when and as prescribed?
* Inquire about recent Regulation 44 or Ofsted visits.
* See the child/young person’s bedroom. – Is it personalized for the child/young person? Do they have toys, objects of interest, books, etc.? If specialist equipment is needed, is this available in appropriate settings in the placement? How often is equipment reviewed?
* Inquire about what activities or play/leisure/social opportunities are available to the child/young person in the residential placement. - See play facilities on site.
* Inquire about school attendance and target progression. Especially if at an education residential provision, but equally important to know at non–education residentials to consider how they can support the child/young person in their care relating to education.
* If the child/young person is available, visit with them alone. According to their abilities, inquire about what activities they enjoy doing. Ask if they can give you a tour of their bedroom. When did they last speak or visit with those who care about them, including parents/carers and siblings? What do they enjoy about school?

The unannounced visit will enable practitioners and supervisors to assess and analyze whether the child/young person’s:

* Lived experience is in line with what we see in planned visits (what we expect to see), what has been agreed in relation to their support (i.e. behavioral plans) and is in accordance with the commissioned service of the residential.
* Engages regularly in age-appropriate activities and has access to explore areas of interest.
* Voice is heard and documented.
* Physical and mental health needs are met and understood.
* Life experiences are well understood and put into context.
* Placement continues to meet their needs and promotes their wellbeing.
* Continues to have links with their family, peers, and community and are supported to have that contact.

The child young person should be seen alone and the discussion with the child/young person should be captured in your recording of the visit.

Every attempt should be made to see the child young person as part of the Unannounced Visit regardless of their communication ability or complexity of needs. Where this has not been achieved, please discuss it with your Line Manager and ensure it is clear in your recording the reason why this was not accomplished.

Unannounced visits should take place regardless of the legal status of the child young person.

Any issues arising from the unannounced visit should be addressed at the time of the visit and reinforced at the next supervision session between practitioner and team manager. Depending on the circumstances further unannounced visits may be deemed necessary. Should any social worker fail to address a safeguarding concern this will be considered as a potential disciplinary.

It is not suggested that anyone other than the allocated worker undertake an unannounced visit.

**** Frequency of Unannounced Visits

It is encouraged that an unannounced visit should be made to a residential placement within the first six months of the child young person’s beginning of the placement in the residential setting.

The unannounced visit should be easily distinguished in recording as a separate visit to the regular CIN or CLA visits; this is because those visits are separate with different objectives. Social Workers are encouraged to prepare to visit at a time the child is known to be present, where possible.

 Recording of the Unannounced Visit.

Practitioners to ensure that the Looked After children visit template (within CwD) is utilized as fully as possible. Additionally, you will want to add to your recording where appropriate eg. the decision, interactions, and observations of the child/young person and this should specifically highlight views of the child/young person. It is important that you seek out the opportunity to obtain the views of the child young person visited in their residential setting regardless of their communication abilities or disabilities. The visit should clearly record the tools used to communicate with the child, interactions had, and any observations of them during the visit.

Where the child has been seen, it should be cross-referenced on the child/young person’s recordings. The room check must be logged on to the child/young person’s recording.

Where the child/young person is not present for the unannounced visit, it still qualifies as the yearly unannounced visit as long as quality assurance ‘checks’ outlined within this document and visit template are completed. It does not count as a statutory visit and a plan to return to see the child alone at the next visit should be included within the write-up.

When recording the unannounced visit, choose the statutory visit (Looked After Child) drop down, check whether the child was seen (alone), and within the Reason for Contact write Unannounced Visit. Follow the unannounced visit template found in Appendix A.

What to do if there are safeguarding issues?

* Discuss with your manager and Independent Reviewing Officer (Be Professionally curious). If concerns link to acting on concerns of significant harm, following [Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership strategy meeting policy.](https://surreyscb.procedures.org.uk/zkyqzq/managing-individual-cases/strategy-discussions-and-section-47-enquiries/#s4595)
* Consult with the LADO where there are concerns about a professional working with a child/young person.

