

Practice guidance for the calling of Stability and Disruption Meetings

This practice guidance provides clarity around the process of calling a Stability Meeting when a foster placement is facing challenges and where there is a risk of break down.

The guidance also emphasises the importance of having a learning opportunity in the form of a Disruption Meeting when a fostered child/young person moves on following challenges and difficulties.

References to Legislation, Regulation and Statutory Guidance (England):

- Fostering Regulations (England) 2011
- National Minimum Standards

Introduction

Ensuring the stability of children and young people's life experiences in foster care requires a service-wide approach and early intervention, where possible. There needs to be a genuine quest for partnership from all involved professionals to offer support to foster carers and the children/young people when difficulties occur.

When a carer offers notice on a child/young person's care it can be a traumatic experience and adds to the loss and separation in children and young people's lives. A child's psychological and emotional wellbeing will be compromised every time they have an unplanned move, and placement instability often contributes to a range of poor outcomes, including poorer educational outcomes, breakdown of relationships with trusted adults and increase in vulnerability.

As professionals we have a duty to act and support fostering families, to try and prevent break-down. We must have a collaborative approach which shares the risks and celebrates the successes.

Responding in a collaborative manner will create a holistic and restorative approach which in turn should create opportunities for positive change. We must explore creative solutions as a team, to help support the child's lived experiences. We need to ensure we are all listening to foster carer concerns and act swiftly to prevent embedment of concerns and likelihood of disruption.

Stability Meetings

When to call a stability meeting, and the way we respond, is crucial if we are to offer adequate and an appropriate level of support to fostering families who are encroaching into crisis. We need to listen to foster carers to understand and to begin the process of supporting and stabilising family-life.

When supporting foster carers, the onus is equally on the Supervising Social Worker and Children's Social Worker to flag any emerging issues and concerns at an early stage. They must communicate together to decide the most appropriate way forward.

They should consider the appropriateness of calling a Stability Meeting when all other options such as team manager visits to the fostering family, visits by social workers to speak to the child/young person or care planning meetings, have been exhausted and produced no noticeable improvement in the relationships or management of issues within the fostering family.

Process

The Stability Meeting is a practical, problem-solving meeting. Information needs to be properly gathered and analysed, and the areas of difficulty presented for discussion and resolution.

If there is serious consideration being given to convening a Stability Meeting, the social worker (SSW or CSW) must first discuss the circumstances with their respective Team Manager and get their agreement that a Stability Meeting is the correct route to go down. This decision should then be communicated to the Fostering Team Manager or Children's Team Manager dependent on who has decided to call the meeting.

The Team Managers will then decide between them which one will Chair and minute the meeting. They will also instruct the SSW or CSW to arrange the meeting. The invitees should be agreed between the social workers and team managers.

The meeting should take place within 7-working days.

Reasons to call a Stability Meeting

- Concerns are raised by involved professionals regarding the stability of the child/young person's life in foster care.
- The child or young person is absconding or being absent from placement on a regular basis.
- There are relationship challenges between the child/young person and foster carer(s).
- The child or young person has made it known that they would like their time with the foster carer(s) to end.
- The carer(s) have expressed concerns that they are experiencing difficulties, and they feel they can no longer care for the child or young person.
- The SSW/CSW and/or other involved professionals raise concern that the care does not meet the needs of the child or young person.

Who should be involved/invited?

The Stability Meeting takes the form of a strategy or planning meeting and can be convened for in-house and IFA foster placements, or residential placements in the independent sector, which are at serious risk of breakdown. If an IFA placement, or residential placement in the

independent sector, is at risk, then a member of the Placement Co-ordination team must be invited to the Stability Meeting to ensure that their team can carry out its monitoring, support, and other responsibilities in respect of the IFA or independent residential placement.

Involved professionals may also include:

Strengthening Families/Early Help
Youth Services
CiC Nurses and Health
Family Group Conferencing
Education
CAMHS
Residential staff
Placement Co-ordination
Independent Reviewing Officer

It is the responsibility of all those professionals who are involved in the care of the child/young person to contribute to the information shared within the disruption meeting.

Consideration must always be given as to whether it is also in the child's best interests, and appropriate, to be invited to attend the meeting. This is to ensure that their wishes and feelings are fully considered and taken in to account in respect of any proposed decisions that will affect them directly.

Foster Carers' Participation

In order to take a consistent line with carers, even if it is felt that on occasion the presence of the carers may cause workers to feel inhibited in their contributions; the presumption will be that the foster carers, will be invited to the first meeting unless there are substantial evidenced reasons why the carers should not be invited.

Those evidenced reasons must be recorded in the minutes of the Stability Meeting. If the carers are not invited, they must be informed in advance of the meeting that it is taking place and be given the reason for not inviting them. Their written comments should be invited, to be shared at the meeting if they are not invited.

Child / Young Person's Participation

Prior to the meeting taking place, the CSW should visit the child/young person to ensure their wishes and feelings are ascertained. There should be a clear age-appropriate explanation about the purpose of the meeting and to explore with the child/young person what their vision of the future is or what support needs they and the carer(s) may need. This discussion with the child/young person should be shared within the stability meeting with the other participants and captured within the minutes.

The Content of the Meeting

The focus of the meeting should primarily be on offering support and the involvement of partner agencies in supporting the foster carer(s) and child/young person. Discussion should include:

- a) the factors that are causing stress for the carers and/or child/young person. These may be related to an activity or behaviours of the child/young person, carers, birth family or other professionals.
- b) the child/young person's welfare and their wishes and feelings.
- c) to identify and consider the strengths of the fostering family. These should be the focus of strengthening further with the addition of professionals and/or other people in their support network.
- d) to seek solutions to support the carers and child/young person to avoid breakdown, by identifying the necessary resources required to provide stability.
- e) to clarify, if a disruption is likely, or deemed in the child's best interests, what plan will be put in place.

The outcomes of the meeting, specifically what actions have been agreed, who will implement them, and within what timescales, should be recorded in writing.

If the carers have not been invited to the meeting, they should know the outcome within 2 working days. They should also be shared, where appropriate, with the child, within 5 working days.

There should also be review proposals, indicating how all parties will know if a proposed outcome has been successfully achieved and when the next meeting will take place (within 4-weeks)

The aim is to restore stability and support the foster carers so that they can continue to offer a foster home to the child/young person.

If it is necessary to consider changing the care plan for the child, a looked after child review must be convened within 28 days and any changes must be discussed at that meeting.

Common Themes

Placement stability is associated with better outcomes for looked after children. It is achieved by providing an environment where the child/young person is securely attached to one (or more) carer who provides a safe, consistent and effective environment where the child/young person feels emotionally secure.

Positive Factors which will offer stability and support:

- Recognition of the challenging task of fostering and treating carers as partners.

- The carer and child to both have emotional wellness (i.e. carer does not feel the child is "out of control" or running the family into the ground).
- The carer likes the child; the carer demonstrates good parenting; the carers' expectations for the child are realistic; they accept the child for who they are.
- The child/young person shares or has shared a positive relationship with the foster carer(s).
- Promoting diversity in foster care; recognition of the child/young person's ethnicity and cultural needs are being met.
- Recognition by the school/educational establishment that the child has additional needs, and the school is prepared to meet those needs and support the foster placement.
- The child, carer and social workers have a good relationship with the child/young person's birth family. There is continuity in the child's relationships.
- Recognition for the carers' family and friends support network.

Risk Factors which will destabilise and lead to break down:

- Lack of social work support/case unallocated.
- Placement of the child/young person was unplanned; carer not properly advised of the child/young person's needs and not prepared for the challenges/difficulties.
- Appropriate resources not being identified or there being a delay in implementation.
- The extent of the trauma experienced by the child/young person is not fully understood.
- The child/young person continuously expressing dislike for their living circumstances. Children/young people who are unable to settle at home or in school; children with particularly strong attachments to their birth family, who have an absolute belief that they will return home.
- Education and stability go hand in hand. A child excluded from school, even for short periods, puts great pressure on the fostering family and carer(s).
- Where the contact arrangements are fraught or unresolved; and there are poor relationships between birth family and carer/social workers.
- Concerns of the foster carer who believes the presence of the foster child/young person is impacting on their own family/children; or the carer is stressed by other life events; or the carer associates the child with other problems such as an allegation or previous disruption.

Outcomes

The meeting should result in a documented course of action detailing next steps and the persons responsible for undertaking actions. A structured plan of work including recommendations/actions and timescales should be formulated.

A follow-up meeting should be agreed to take place in 4-weeks and a rolling programme of meetings may be deemed appropriate.

Minutes of the Stability Meeting

The minutes should be uploaded into the Stability Meeting form embedded on LCS on the carers' file for internal foster carers.

For IFA carers or residential, the Stability Meeting minutes will be completed on the child's LCS file.

There should also be a Case Note added to record the meeting has taken place.

A copy of the minutes should also be made available to the foster carer(s).

Disruption Meetings

The purpose of the Disruption Meeting is not to attribute blame. It is to provide all participants with an opportunity to share information and learning space to review the causes of the disruption. Participants should agree the factors that led to the disruption and assess learning for future practice.

Decision to call a Disruption Meeting

A Disruption Meeting **must be convened** in the following circumstances:

- When a permanent placement, identified as being a long-term match disrupts. This is irrespective of whether notice to end placement has been given.
- When a placement of over two years duration ends in an unplanned way.

A Disruption Meeting **should be considered** in the following circumstances:

- When a foster carer ends the placement without notice.
- When a child's placement ended in an unplanned way

Within two days of a placement disruption, the SSW must inform their Fostering Team Manager or in the case of an IFA placement or residential, the CSW must inform their respective manager. A date, within 4-6 weeks of the breakdown, should be agreed for the Disruption Meeting and who should be invited.

The Chair of the Meeting

Where a child was living in an internal long term foster placement, the Disruption Meeting should be chaired by a Fostering Team Manager.

Where a child was placed in an external long term fostering placement or residential, the Disruption Meeting should be chaired by a Locality Team Manager.

Once a Chair has been identified they will have a discussion with the Social Worker, Team Manager, IRO and Supervising Social Worker to agree attendees/venue/date.

Attendees may include:

1. The child;
2. The parents;
3. The child's social worker and manager;
4. The foster carer(s) and supervising social worker;
5. The child's independent reviewing officer;
6. The fostering independent reviewing officer
7. The child's current carers;
8. Other relevant staff/professionals (health, education, CAMHs etc)

It is the responsibility of all those professionals who have been involved in the care of the child/young person to contribute to the information shared within the disruption meeting.

Child/ Young Person's Participation

Prior to the meeting taking place, the CSW should visit the child/young person to ensure their wishes and feelings are ascertained. There should be a clear age-appropriate explanation about the purpose of the meeting and to explore with the child/young person, their views of the breakdown. This discussion with the child/young person should be shared within the disruption meeting with the other participants and captured within the minutes.

The Content of the Meeting

The focus of the meeting should primarily be to identify the reasons for the break-down and the provision of support. The Chair will:

- Gain an understanding for the background and facilitate a discussion around what happened for the child and for the foster carers leading up to and post-disruption. To identify what's not worked which have thereby made things difficult for the fostering family.
- To look at the quality of the preparation, matching and support offered the foster family and child/young person.
- To give the foster carer(s) the opportunity to reflect on events, and the opportunity to explore.
- To hear from the child/young person as to their understanding about why they moved on.
- To promote restorative practice to repair the carer/child relationship.
- To identify future support for the child/young person to reduce the risk of further disruptions.

- To contribute to the future planning for the child, where appropriate.
- To give the fostering service the opportunity to explore and consider trends and patterns.

Outcomes

The outcome of the meeting minutes should offer the child (depending on his or her age and level of understanding) an opportunity to understand the reasons for the break down and ensure they are provided with the necessary support/understanding within their new family/home.

Considerations for the Chair when making recommendations/action points:

- Where there have been concerns in relation to a foster carers' practice, consideration should be given to requesting an early Foster Carer Review to reassess the foster carer's terms of approval.
- Consideration should be given to updating the carer's learning and development plan with any relevant training.
- Ensuring the child/young person understands the reasons why break-down occurred and to explore options for a therapeutic ending/restorative conversation between the child/young person and carer(s), if appropriate.
- Ensuring that the child/young person's belongings have been given to the child/young person.
- Ensuring that life story work has been shared with the young person including information about friendships, relationships, memories, current interests/activities, and pets etc.

Learning from the meeting should be shared with a Head of Service and Service Managers so consideration is given to the possible impact on any policies and procedures.

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