



Cheshire East

TOGETHER for Children and Young People

Together we will make Cheshire East a great place to be young

Family Time Policy

Children and Families

February 2026



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Restorative Practice

In Cheshire East we have adopted restorative practices when we support children and families. This model is based on relational practice that encourages practitioners working with children and their families to build relationships, seeking to understand their perspectives and working with them to build on their strengths, empowering them to better manage the risks and challenges they may face now and in the future.

Executive Summary

This policy sets out how Cheshire East Children's Services will promote and facilitate Family Time (contact) between children and their families who are in court proceedings or who are Cared for by the Local Authority.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Cheshire East Council is fully committed to promoting Family Time for cared for children and young people.
- 1.2 We not only have a legal duty to promote Family Time for children in care, but evidence shows that getting this right can improve long term outcomes for children and young people.
- 1.3 Cheshire East Council always gives full consideration to the arrangements for Family Time within the overall care planning process for the child and will take account of the voice of the child and their wishes and feelings.
- 1.4 Cheshire East Council has a dedicated Family Time Service, which work largely with children subject to care proceedings and who are cared for.

2. Aims and Principles

- 2.1 The aim of this policy is to provide a clear structure for determining appropriate arrangements for Family Time with children and young people who are subject to care proceedings or who are Cared for by the Local Authority.
- 2.2 Family Time places a greater emphasis on the quality and duration of the time as opposed to the frequency. In doing so, we acknowledge that each family is unique, and this may influence decisions in the application of this policy.
- 2.3 To do this effectively the following principles must apply:
 - Family Time must always be in the best interests of the child and focused on their needs, not focused on the needs of the parent or carer.
 - Any arrangements must be based on the needs identified in the child's care plan.

- All Family Time Plans will be rooted in a full assessment of need, reflecting the welfare principles of the Children Act 1989 and will be able to demonstrate that all relevant parties within the plan have been consulted.
- Arrangements for Family Time will likely need to change over time to reflect the child's developing needs, wishes, feelings, lifestyle and relationships.

3. Purpose of Family Time

3.1 Family Time primarily exists to enable children to maintain continuance of necessary relationships with their birth parents and family members, which should also include 'significant others' as it is not always family who are most important. Direct work should be completed with any child who is looked after, to explore who their important relationships are.

3.2 Family Time can also be a significant aid to the stability of the care placement itself.

3.3 Additionally, it can also provide:

- Reduced discomfort of divided loyalty and guilt
- Reassurance about the parents' wellbeing
- Maintenance of a realistic view of the non-resident or biological parent
- Links with biological roots and identity
- Reality of shared parental responsibility
- Shared understandings of the past
- Likelihood of later reunion in adulthood
- Maintaining shared memories.

3.4 Within the assessment phase, Family Time provides the opportunity to assess, support, intervene and model parenting styles and capacities. These activities occur alongside determining the child's needs and understanding their wishes and feelings.

3.5 Family Time may benefit both the child and birth relatives in numerous ways, but it is important to recognise that these benefits will not be present for all. In setting out the Family Time Plan for a child or young person it is important to set out and clarify the purpose(s) of the Family Time.

3.6 For the child, Family Time may assist in:

- helping to ease their sense of loss and provide reassurance about the wellbeing of birth relatives and significant others.
- maintaining relationships that are important to them.

- assessing whether reunification with the birth family is possible.
- maintaining relationships so that reunification is possible.
- Understanding / building their identity.
- understanding their life journey.
- supporting cultural, religious and identity needs, especially for children from BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) groups.

3.7 For children in long-term placements, including adoption, Family Time may also assist in:

- helping them to understand the past.
- providing an opportunity for the young person to gain more knowledge and understanding about their personal and family history.
- helping them to maintain links with their race, religion, and culture of origin – which may enhance their self-esteem and identity.
- linking their past and present.
- enabling them to see their birth family's acceptance of their carers and therefore reducing feelings of divided loyalties,

3.8 For the birth family, Family Time may assist in:

- helping to ease their sense of loss.
- maintaining relationships so that reunification remains a possibility.
- Learning and developing parenting skills.
- promoting sibling Family Time.

3.9 In long-term placements, Family Time may also help birth families through:

- Enabling them to come to terms with the new circumstances including acceptance of the carers
- Enabling them to give the child a link with the past and reassurance
- Enabling parents to demonstrate positive changes to their parenting style to ensure that reunification is continuously considered.

3.10 For the carer, Family Time may assist in:

- providing reassurance for the child, reducing anxiety, fear of rejection and improving placement stability.
- improving the carers' understanding of the child's birth family and providing information from the past which may assist in understanding current and future behaviour of the child.
- understanding the child's life journey.

3.11 In long-term placements, Family Time may also assist carers in:

- working with the child's story throughout the course of childhood rather than closing off the child's past.
- encouraging discussion with the child and helping them to understand their situation better.
- allowing birth families to give carers permission to parent the child.
- helping the carer to give the child a view of relationships which can change over time as circumstances change.

4. Frequency

4.1 The frequency of Family Time will be dependent upon the purpose of it, the age and the needs of the child. For children who have multiple Family Time commitments, there will need to be careful consideration as to how they also spend time within their placement to build relationships and have time for leisure activities.

4.2 Young children who are removed from harm and provided with secure caregiving are able to form an attachment to their new carer. However, this attachment can be compromised if family contact with the child's birth family is not sensitively handled (Schofield and Simmonds, 2011).

4.3 Infants who have frequent Family Time with their birth family may suffer constant disruption to their daily routines and may be unable to experience the kinds of settled caregiving they need to help repair the harm they have experienced. Such Family Time arrangements can produce high levels of stress for the infant through discontinuity of care and potentially insensitive care during Family Time. It can then be a challenge for carers to help the infant to relax and trust them and may compromise the child's development.

4.4 The quality of Family Time between the child and their parent is the overriding feature to ensure maximum benefit for the child. Frequency, method, and duration will be informed by:

- Purpose of Family Time.
- Emotional capability of the child and parent to manage Family Time, which can at times be difficult especially in the initial stages.
- Views of the child.
- Potential disruption and stress to the child caused by the Family Time arrangements.
- Ages of children.
- Any additional needs of the child.

- The needs of the child, such as travelling, nursery and school times and leisure activities.
- Parents ability and willingness to engage with Family Time.

4.5 The table below provides a guide on frequency of Family Time depending on age of the child. We aim to be flexible to accommodate all requests for Family Time. However, this will be dependent on demand, and the ages of children will be considered. For example, children under school age will be allocated times between 9am -2.30pm, which will allow school age children to attend from 3pm onwards.

4.6 The guide is usually for children during care proceedings and the Family Time plan to support a child's permanence plan will differ depending on individual needs. Family Time will be assessed using a Family Time decision making tool, which will consider the views and needs of the child/ren, the background information and family relationships and the purpose of Family Time. The decision-making tool (Appendix 5) should be completed at the stage of making a request to enter care proceedings e.g. Legal Gateway. It should be reviewed regularly throughout the care proceedings and used to determine the final care plan for children and young people.

Age	Maintaining Family Time during the assessment period
0-2 years	1.5 – 2-hour sessions 3x per week
3-4 years	1.5-hour sessions 2x per week
5-10 years	1-hour (after school) 2x per week
11-16 years	2-hour (after school) session once per week

4.7 Family Time sessions provided during the assessment and court-related stages will be offered on weekdays. In exceptional circumstances, if the needs of the child dictate it, sessions can be arranged at weekends.

4.8 Family Time that coincides with a Bank Holiday will be cancelled and if the needs of the child require this to be rearranged, attempts will be made to re arrange this as soon as possible after the missed family time, even if this is for a short duration.

- 4.9 Family Time frequency and length during the Christmas period may be required to change. This is to allow all cared for children an equal opportunity to see their parents and/or family during the festive period, Family Time sessions will be offered on a pro-rotas basis dependent on how many sessions are normally scheduled per week. Additional Family Time may be achieved should parties within proceedings; carers and the family network be agreeable to supervise a safe Family Time arrangement between themselves. Normal Family Time arrangements will resume from the first working day in January.
- 4.10 It is acknowledged that the Christmas period can be a difficult time for families who are not living together, so attempts to ensure all families are able to have family time during the Christmas period will be made. The use of virtual Family Time can also be utilised during this period.

5. Family Time during care proceedings

5.1 The frequency of Family Time must be based on assessed needs of the child:

- The age and needs of the child will be of upmost consideration.
- The wishes and views of the child.
- Flexibility to consider the changing needs from when a child is first placed away from their birth family to when they are more settled needs to be considered.
- Nursery and school should not be disrupted, including the need for homework and leisure activities.
- The care plan and needs of the family must be considered when determining the initial Family Time plan.
- Travel time needs to be considered for children, so they are able to have a stable routine.
- The need for children to settle into their placements and form bonds.

6. Family Time following the conclusion of care proceedings

- 6.1 Family time arrangements may change during the course of care proceedings depending on review, however it is likely that where there are no significant requirements to do so, family time would remain the same until the conclusion of care proceedings.
- 6.2 The final care plan will determine the frequency and duration of Family Time. There will likely be a reduction/transition plan for Family Time, which the Family Time team will continue to support with. This will provide consistency and stability to children and families at an already difficult time for them.

7. Family Time where rehabilitation is agreed

7.1 This will need to be at a pace to meet the needs of the child and family to progress and support reunification. The frequency of such rehabilitation sessions will be determined by their social worker, considering the needs of the child irrespective of their age.

8. Sibling Family Time

8.1 Sibling Family Time should be a priority if siblings are not living together. Siblings will likely see other during Family Time however there should always be consideration for additional time for siblings to see each other outside of this. This again will depend on the needs of the children and their wishes. The Family Time can be supported by the wider network of carers or the Family Time service can support with additional sibling Family Time arrangements.

9. Non-Attendance and behaviour of Parents at Family Time

9.1 If parents or family members miss two Family Time sessions consecutively without notice or without satisfactory explanation, then Family Time will be suspended. The suspension will last for a maximum period of 7 days unless a court order is obtained. Within the 7-day period, a Family Time review will be held, with a plan of how to support Family Time to be achieved. There is a likely plan of requirements being placed on parents to confirm their attendance earlier in the day at this stage. The decision should be notified to all parties, including parent(s), child(ren) if they are of an age to understand, and any guardians of the child.

9.2 If non-attendance by parents or family members continues, then Family Time will continue to be reviewed, with the frequency and duration of Family Time being amended to reflect the achievable level of Family Time. This will support children to know when they are seeing their family and have some stability and consistency.

9.3 Once regular attendance has been achieved, consideration should be given as to whether it is in the best interests of the child to increase the level of Family Time to the level originally specified.

9.4 Where there are active care proceedings the Local Authority Solicitor with conduct for the case should be informed of the intention to suspend contact and the date of any meeting.

9.5 Parents and/or family members must not attend Family Time under the influence of alcohol/drugs. If anyone attends under the influence of any substances they will not be permitted into the Family Time. If anyone is using any medication that can impact their presentation, this needs to be discussed to ensure appropriate support is in place.

9.6 If any person attending Family Time, presents in an aggressive or violent manner towards any person, the Family Time will be suspended. A review meeting will be arranged following any difficulties with behaviour and presentation within Family Time.

10. Roles and Responsibilities with Family Time Arrangements

10.1 It is the responsibility of the social worker to complete a Family Time 'Contact Team Referral Form' on Liquid Logic – see the [Contact Team Referral Process Map](#) for more details. This is located within the child/children's electronic records. The form is mandatory and must be completed in full and consolidated providing a record/form on each child requiring Family Time. The referral should detail, the frequency, duration, level of supervision, individual needs of the child/family along with a plan for any intervention required with the family during Family Time. Any risk assessments also need to be included in the referral so there can be adequate planning.

10.2 The social worker's Team Manager will approve the Family Time Contact Service Referral and progress it to the Family Time Allocation Work Tray.

10.3 The Family Time Team Manager, will review the referral and either return this for further information or allocate the Family Time to a Family Time worker.

10.4 The Cheshire East Family Time Service will provide family time workers / supervisors and assist in the identified support; modelling and observation tasks up until court proceedings are completed. It is the responsibility of the social worker to ensure any assessment tasks required to be undertaken by the family time worker are agreed and clearly communicated.

10.5 When Family Time is being supervised during court proceedings, there is an expectation that the allocated social worker will attend and observe Family Time on at least two occasions as part of their assessment and to assist with the formulation of plans.

10.6 A Family Time planning meeting will be arranged by the Family Time Service once there has been an allocated worker identified. The meeting is expected to be attended by the Family Time worker, the Social Worker, the parents and where possible the carers. The meeting will discuss the plan of Family Time, the expectations, complete the Family Time agreement and provide the parents and foster carers with the Family Time information packs. The packs will contain information on what is Family Time, details of the venues, supervisors including photos and phone numbers. Further details regarding the family and important information as well as information regarding life story work during Family Time.

10.7 The risk assessment (RA1) must be carried out by the child's social worker when it is deemed that there are risks related to any safety factors for the child and family time workers / supervisors. This might be related to potential aggression /

parental mental health / substance misuse, or allegations / data breaches that might impact onto the wellbeing of the child. The risk assessment can also be used as a tool for assessing if the child's behaviour and needs, including medical needs, pose any risks and how they will be managed.

- 10.8 The Cheshire East Family Time Service will provide a Family Time plan at the initial planning meeting. The plan will include set times, dates and venues of family time. The Family Time worker is responsible to ensure it is communicated with all parties and if not satisfactory, then ownership is with the Family Time worker to manage the expectation of Family Time if the plan is not agreeable or declined.
- 10.9 The Family Time Agreement (Appendix 3) needs to be signed and in place with parents (or any other relevant party) prior to Family Time going ahead (ideally at the planning meeting).
- 10.10 In the absence of a family time worker; the Family Time Service is responsible to source cover within the first instance and if unsuccessful the social worker will be contacted to offer every opportunity for Family Time to go ahead. If this cannot happen a decision will need to be made, between the social work and Family Time team if the Family Time is cancelled. If Family Time is cancelled, the Family Time Service will inform all involved parties, including the child if appropriate. Attempts will be made to re arrange the Family Time where appropriate and possible.
- 10.11 The Family Time Workers will, where possible, attend care planning meetings, Child Looked After Reviews and any other meeting appropriate. The allocated social worker will be responsible for ensuring the Family Time workers are invited. Family Time workers can contact the allocated social worker and independent reviewing officer to request a meeting takes place if required.
- 10.12 Family Time workers will arrange 6 weekly Family Time review meetings, this will review the progress of Family Time, any difficulties and support needs of the family. The allocated social worker will be invited to these meetings and must attend should there be any decisions required regarding the duration and/or frequency of Family Time, along with any safeguarding concerns. The review meetings will have a recording template and be recorded on the child's file.
- 10.13 The Family Time Team Manager, will provide supervision of the Family Time that each workers supports. This will be recorded on a case note on the child's file and will consider, the quality, support needs, progress and any actions that may be required.
- 10.14 During a supervised Family Time session, the Family Time worker / supervisor will:
 - promote positive interactions by supporting the child and their parent(s).
 - where appropriate, enable the development of parenting skills.

- be able to hear and see interaction between the child and the other participants in the session at all times.
- be mindful of any whispering, use of language that is not familiar to the worker and ensure any child using toilets that require assistance are supervised if this is required / identified.
- intervene where the child and family time worker have significant concerns about immediate safety and the emotional wellbeing of the child.
- report any safeguarding concerns immediately to the social worker, team manager and Family Time Manager.
- record Family Time on the child's electronic record using the recording template. This will be recorded within case notes under the relevant case note heading. Recordings should be completed within two working days.
- Family Time case recordings will be used to inform court-based assessment and can be used in court as evidence.
- Family Time Workers can complete court related statements and attend court to give evidence as and when required.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Policy Information Sheet

Policy Information Sheet	
Service Area	Children and Families
Date effective from	February 2026
Responsible Officer	Family Time Manager
Date for Review	February 2028
Status <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mandatory (all staff must adhere to guidance) • Optional (Procedures and practice can vary between teams) 	Mandatory
Target Audience	All staff within Children and Families
Related Document(s)	Family Time One Minute Guide
Superseded Documents	Family Time Policy 2023
Equality Impact Assessment	Checklist completed – see over
Date of Approval	26 February 2026

Type of Document	Policy	X	Standard Operating Procedure		Guideline	
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Document control

Version no	Type of change	Date	Description of change

If you have any comments or views on this document, please contact us at childrensdevelopmentandpartnerships@cheshireeast.gov.uk

Appendix 2 – EIA information and checklist

Equality Impact Assessment

Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) must be completed whenever you plan, change, or remove a service, policy or function. They should be an **integral** part of continuous service planning and policy development. For further details and guidance on completing EIAs please see [here](#).

EIA Checklist

Equality Impact Assessment			
1	Does the policy/guidance affect one group less or more favourably than another on the basis of:	Yes/ No	Comments
	Race	N	
	Ethnic origins (including gypsies and travellers)	N	
	Nationality	N	
	Gender	N	
	Culture	N	
	Religion or belief	N	
	Sexual orientation including lesbian, gay and bisexual people	N	
	Age	N	
	Disability-learning disabilities, physical disability, sensory impairment and mental health problems	N	
2	Is there any evidence that some groups are affected differently?	N	
	If you have identified potential discrimination, are any exceptions valid, legal and/or justifiable?	N/A	
3	Is the impact of the policy/guidance likely to be negative?	N	
a	If yes can the impact be avoided?	N/A	
b	What alternatives are there to achieving the policy / guidance without the impact?	N/A	
c	Can we reduce the impact by taking different action	N/A	
4	Evidence considered – What data or other information have you used to evaluate if this policy is likely to have a positive or an adverse impact upon protected groups when implemented?	Yes	The previous policy has been reviewed, and relevant changes have been made following consultation with staff, parents/carers and children.
5	Initial consultation – Have you consulted staff representatives and/or external	No	

	representatives including those from protected groups? What were their views?		
6	Promoting equality - Does this policy have a positive impact on equality? What evidence is there to support this? Could it do more?	Yes	The policy promotes and supports Family Time for all children and families, supporting their identity.

Appendix 3 – Types of Family Time

[Types of Family Time.docx](#)

Appendix 4 – Other Considerations

[Family Time - Other Considerations.docx](#)

Appendix 5 – Family Time Agreement

[Family Time Agreement - Blank Template.docx](#)

Appendix 6 – Family Time Planning Meeting

[Family Time Planning Meeting - Blank Template.docx](#)

Appendix 7 – Family Time Decision-Making Tool

[Family Time Frequency Decision Making Tool - Blank Template.docx](#)