

## **Short breaks**

### **Legislation and guidance**

Part 3 of the Children Act 1989 sets out local authorities' powers and duties to provide support services for children in need and their families, which definition includes disabled children.

Statutory Guidance on How to Safeguard and Promote the Welfare of Disabled Children using Short Breaks describes the requirements for assessment, planning and review, whether or not the child is looked after by the local authority.

Regulation 48 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 modifies the application of these regulations to short breaks for looked after children, and the accompanying statutory guidance in chapter 6 of the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2 provides further detail.

Regulation 42 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011 modifies these regulations in respect of looked after children receiving short breaks.

### **Introduction**

Disabled children are particularly vulnerable to neglect and abuse and their families are prone to higher levels of stress and lower levels of parental wellbeing. Short breaks are part of a continuum of services which support children in need and their families. They include the provision of day, evening, overnight and weekend activities for a child, and can take place in the child's own home, the home of an approved carer, or in a residential or community setting.

Children can receive short breaks under Section 17(6) of the Children Act 1989, in which case they are not deemed to be looked after. Alternatively they can be provided with short breaks as a looked after child accommodated under section 20(4).

The decision to provide short breaks under section 17(6) or section 20(4) should be informed by the assessment of the child's needs and vulnerability, the nature, length and frequency of the short breaks, the parents' ability to monitor the quality of care and the wishes and feelings of the child and parents. The decision should be based on which would most effectively promote and safeguard the welfare of the child, that is whether they require the additional safeguards of the children looked after system to promote their

welfare. Chapter two of the short breaks statutory guidance provides more detail to inform decision making.

Where a child receives short breaks under section 20(4), there is provision under the care planning regulations for a reduction of the visiting and review arrangements to take account of the continuing involvement of the parents. However, this applies only to children where the breaks take place with the same carer, a single short break lasts less than 17 days, and the total does not exceed 75 days a year.

The placement must be with an approved foster carer if the child is looked after, and the guidance advises that it is best practice for any child who is cared for overnight, whether looked after or not, to be placed with a foster carer.

### **Assessment of short breaks foster carers**

Prospective short breaks foster carers must be assessed in the same way as for any other applicant to foster, except that the role of the parent is greater than with a mainstream foster placement. As the parents will remain responsible for providing clothing and a personal allowance and because there will be no need for contact arrangements, these areas will not need to be discussed. Short breaks carers will normally also take a more minimal role in preparing a child for independence. **See policy: Assessment of foster carers.**

In addition to the information covered with all prospective foster carers, the assessor should focus on issues relating to disability and caring for disabled children. Areas for discussion include:

- the applicant's understanding of the social model of disability and how they would overcome any obstacles faced by the child;
- the applicant's understanding of their own attitudes and prejudices and how they would help a child who suffered from discrimination;
- the applicant's willingness to use appropriate language when talking about people with disabilities;
- how the applicant would advocate for the child and take their wishes and feelings into account;
- different methods of communication, such as Makaton, Picture Exchange System (PECS), sign language and the applicant's knowledge of these or willingness to learn them;
- the particular vulnerability of children with disabilities to abuse and bullying;
- personal care tasks and how the applicant would help the child maintain a sense of control and dignity;

- whether the applicant is able to feel positive about small developmental progressions, even though these will not equal that of their non-disabled peers;
- the ability to see beyond the disability to other aspects of the child's identity including religion, race and culture;
- the ability to support the child to take reasonable risks in everyday life;
- the ability to set boundaries appropriate to child's age and understanding;
- the ability to care for children with multiple disabilities and complex health needs, including whether they are willing to learn to undertake tasks such as tube-feeding;
- understanding that children with disabilities will experience puberty and have sexual feelings;
- whether they have sufficient time and commitment to provide an intensive level of care, including during the night;
- the ability to work in partnership with parents, who retain full parental responsibility for their child;
- the ability to provide varied and stimulating activities both inside and outside the home; and
- the suitability of the accommodation for children with physical disabilities.

Although it is useful for applicants to have some knowledge of different forms of disability, each child is affected by their disability in different ways and care must be specific to each individual child.

### **Making a placement**

The referral will be made to the Placement Finding Team (PFT) by the social worker who will complete a referral form. The PFT should discuss any potential placements with the supervising social worker (SSW) or team manager and ascertain their view of its suitability before approaching the carer. This will be a planned placement, allowing sufficient time to match the child with the short break foster carer best able to meet their needs.

The following criteria should be taken into account:

- The child's assessed needs.
- The child's ethnicity, culture, religion and language.
- The location of the placement.
- The suitability of the accommodation for the child's needs.
- The skills of the proposed foster carers in terms of meeting the specific needs of the child, such as challenging behaviour or medical needs.
- The views of the child and family.

- The views of the prospective foster carer.
- The views and needs of the carers' birth children.

Possible foster carers should be contacted to ascertain their views. Where a carer is willing to consider the placement further, the social worker should contact the carer to give them more information.

### **Placement planning**

When a potential foster carer is identified, the social worker and parents and child should visit the family to meet them and see the accommodation. Following this visit, all participants will have the opportunity to say whether or not they feel that the short break arrangement will work. The child must be given whatever assistance is required in order to express their wishes and feelings.

If the arrangement is to proceed, the foster carer should be supported to acquire as much information as possible about the child. This should include discussion with the parents, the school and any other people, significantly involved with the child. Important areas of information will include:

- likes and dislikes, special interests, activities, favourite toys and routines;
- preferred method of communication;
- developmental stage and progress;
- behaviour and how this is currently managed, including what calms the child, if they are upset;
- medication and/or medical procedures, carried out at home; and
- equipment and how it is used.

A placement planning meeting should be held. During this meeting a process should be planned to introduce the child to the foster family, the length of which will depend on the needs of each individual child and their ability to adjust to new people and new environments. As a starting point, the foster family should give the parents their Welcome Book to look at with their child. The introductions might include a visit by the foster carers to the child at home and a visit/s by the child and parents to the foster home.

If the child has specialised equipment, a plan is required as to how foster carers will access this, for instance will they be supplied with the same equipment or will the equipment move with the foster child. In some cases an occupational therapy (OT) assessment will be required before the start of the placement. Additionally, there will need to be detailed risk assessments in respect of moving and handling and training about any medical procedures which the parents undertake at home.

Each child assessed as requiring a short break service under section 20(4) should have a Short Break Care Plan and a placement plan. This should include all the information necessary in order to allow those caring for the child to do so safely and sensitively and to promote good outcomes for the child.

The plan must include information about:

- relevant aspects of the child's history and information about their religious and cultural background and how such matters affect the child's daily routine;
- detailed information about the child's routines in order to assist the carer in helping the child to adapt quickly to being away from home, including details about the provision of intimate care;
- the child's health, and emotional and behavioural development including full details about any disabilities, clinical needs and medications the child may have;
- how to manage the child's behaviour and calm them when upset;
- the child's preferred method of communication;
- the child's likes and dislikes with particular regard to their leisure interests;
- how the carers can provide an environment which will promote the child's learning, for example visits to places which may complement the work the child is doing at school;
- arrangements for contacting the parents as necessary, including an emergency number;
- any delegation of parental responsibility to the carer, for example in the case of a medical emergency;
- how the carers will receive information and training about moving and handling, behaviour management, and specific training about any clinical procedures which the parents undertake at home;
- financial arrangements pertaining to the placement;
- how long the arrangement is expected to last and the steps to take to end or change the arrangements;
- whether risk assessments are required in connection with lifting or handling the child; and
- how the child will be introduced to the foster family.

The short break care plan should be signed by the child's parents, the local authority, the foster carers and where appropriate, by the child.

### **Supervision and support**

As with all foster carers, the role of the supervising social worker (SSW) is to supervise and support the carer to carry out their task and, in relation to breaks provided under section 20(4), to ensure that the quality of care meets the Fostering Services National Minimum Standards and the fostering regulations as modified for short breaks. While the short break arrangement continues, the SSW will liaise with the social worker from the Children with Disabilities Team to exchange information and to resolve any difficulties. The SSW will also attend the child's review with the foster carer.

The SSW will be involved in the matching process and in planning the placement. It is important for the SSW to ensure that the carer receives comprehensive information about the child and their needs. Additionally, the SSW should work with the child's social worker to facilitate the introduction of the foster carers to the child and family and to make sure that the carer has the necessary equipment to care safely for the child. Since short break care often takes place at weekends, the SSW should make sure that the carer has the Out of Hours and Emergency Duty Team numbers. New short break carers can also be offered a mentor to provide additional support in their first months of fostering.

The SSW will visit the foster carer once every six weeks. As most children cared for on a short break will require intensive individual attention, the SSW should make some visits when the child is in placement to observe the carer and child together and additionally some supervisory visits, at another time, when it will be possible to discuss the carer's work with the child and other issues. There should be at least one unannounced visit annually, which should take place while the child is in placement.

The purpose of supervision is to:

- ensure that the foster carer understands how they contribute to local authority services for children and enable them to contribute effectively to the aims of the short break care plan;
- monitor the work of foster carers and give them feedback so that they can meet the individual needs of the children;
- give carers the opportunity to raise issues that they feel require action;
- identify any difficulties that carers may need help to resolve;
- support foster carers by providing advice or making this available from elsewhere;
- acknowledge and help foster carers and their family cope with the stress of fostering; and
- help carers develop their skills and knowledge by assessing their training needs and providing opportunities for further development.

During the visit, the SSW will discuss:

- placement issues including the child's wishes and feelings; health; education; leisure activities; development of independence skills; behaviour management; developmental progress; identity issues; working with the parents; working with the child's social worker and other professionals; how the carer is managing the placement and any additional support that might be required; safer caring issues; recording; any equipment required;
- fostering household issues such as holiday plans, issues concerning the impact of fostering on the carers' sons and daughters, health and safety issues;
- foster carers' professional development, through learning from mistakes and difficulties, and their attendance at training and support groups; during the first year of fostering the SSW will also need to check their progress towards evidencing the Training, Support and Development Standards for Foster Care and offer support as necessary;
- the SSW will ensure that the foster carer is conforming to procedures by looking at and signing their recordings to ensure that they contain the right information and level of detail and ensuring that carer's is storing information confidentially; and
- any issues with regard to finance or equipment.

The visit should be recorded on the relevant pro-forma. This must detail how any support needs will be addressed or how any concerns will be dealt with. The SSW and carer should sign it and the carer should be given a copy.

### **Safer care**

Like any other carer, short break foster carers may have a complaint or allegation made against them. As the majority of children with disabilities will require the carer to help with or undertake personal care tasks, there will need to be an individual safer care plan for each child, setting out how these will be performed. This should be based on information from the parent about the routines at home, which will provide continuity and familiarity for the child. The following principles should be observed when carrying out personal care tasks:

- Ensuring the child's privacy, for instance by closing curtains and the door and keep the child covered as much as possible.
- Explaining to the child what is about to happen and asking their permission.
- Checking with the child frequently while carrying out the task.
- Never undertaking a task without proper knowledge and training as to how it should be done.
- Allowing the child to carry out any task which is within their capacity, for instance washing or dressing, even where this takes longer.



- Using appropriate language, for instance pad rather than nappy and tabard as opposed to bib.
- Reporting and recording any incidents or observations while carrying out personal care tasks, for instance if the child feels sore or tender in the genital area; if the child is sexually aroused by the actions of the carer; if the child misunderstands or misinterprets any action; if the child has a strong emotional reaction without any apparent reason; if the carer accidentally hurts the child during the care.

Foster carers should be aware that children with disabilities are more vulnerable to abuse than other children and that they should ensure that they are protected while in their care. Carers should also be alert for any evidence that the child is being abused, for instance in their reaction to being touched or any physical signs. If they have any concerns, these should be discussed with the social worker.

## **Training**

Short break carers must receive relevant generic training about their role in addition to training on lifting and handling. For each child they care for, they should receive specific training on how to meet their needs, for instance how to administer medication, carry out clinical procedures or how to use the child's preferred method of communication. Short break foster carers are required to complete the short breaks workbook of the Training Support and Development Standards within their first year of fostering.