

Leeds Fostering Service

Statement and Practice Guidance – Contact / Family Time

Contact / Family Time is an integral part of the fostering task for all carers and Leeds supports the meaningful engagement of foster carers in contact arrangements.

Contact with their families while in foster care is very important for children and foster carers play a vital role in facilitating family time, whether it is using their own home to for family time or accompanying a child to contact or supervising contact.

While contact is very important, it can bring other issues to the fore such as the emotional impact on children of seeing family members who they cannot live with for reasons they may not understand. It is essential that foster carers are at the heart of arrangements for looked after children and must be fully engaged, supported and consulted at every stage.

All foster carers should have a part to play in having a working relationship with the birth family of the children for whom they care. The level of foster carer involvement may relate to the carer's PFS level and there will be greater expectations on level 3 / 4 foster carers in relation to the supervision of contact.

Contact allows children and young people to know that their parents are safe and helps them understand their own story. There is also a sense in which parents are really in the foster home every day, whether there is direct contact or not.

Foster carers are central to the success of any contact plans for children and must recognise the importance of family time for young people's development, identity and their future family relationships.

There is a need for respectful collaboration between all the parties involved in contact plans – young people, their families, foster carers and social workers. There is also a need to give consideration to other people who may experience an impact from the contact arrangements, including other children and household members in the foster home.

The challenge for foster carers and social workers is to hold on to the purpose of contact when delivering the contact arrangements in the care plan. Agreeing times, dates and sorting out venues are practical issues and they can be difficult to achieve. The result is that family time can become focussed on, and end up being primarily 'about' times, dates and venues. These arrangements are important but their importance is in the meaning they hold for relationships. In reality, it is the time children have with their families - with all the difficulties and tensions that this engenders – that provides foster carers and social workers with additional knowledge to help them work with a child.

Guidance to foster carers:

- Contribute to discussions about contact – both the emotional needs of the children you care for and the practical arrangements which stem from those need
- Be clear about what you are authorised to do about one-off changes in arrangements and the degree to which you can deal directly with parents or other foster carers (if there are siblings in other placements)
- Share your learning from family time with social workers. Use it to inform your own continuing work with the young person, including contributing to an assessment of their future contact needs.
- Ensure that you operate on the basis of sound knowledge and training and be prepared to give evidence for the opinions you hold.
- Be open to discussing differences in view about how to meet the contact needs of your fostered children.
- Be realistic about whether an arrangement will work for you and your family and avoid making an arrangement that will put undue stress on your household because of a wish to be helpful.
- Make sure that any offer to support family time (such as providing transport) is clear and followed through. The more you depend on it to make the plan workable, the more important it is to have it written down.
- Take full advantage of all training opportunities about contact and be prepared to ask for any additional training you need
- Training and support will be provided in order for you to supervise or assessment and record observations of contact.
- Ask questions if you are unclear about your role and make sure that your child's social worker and your supervising social worker understand the implications of possible contact plans for you and other household members.
- Keep the parents' perspective in mind when you are supporting children and families with contact.
- Explore what role you might take, if any, in helping parents and family members understand more about foster care and their child's needs in family time
- Consider any other ways in which you might support contact by working more inclusively with parents

Reference: Fostering Network handbook on contact 'the heart of the matter – supporting family contact for fostered children'. (2011)

Principles

These set of principles should inform social work practice when assessing, planning for, arranging and reviewing contact arrangements:

- There is a presumption of contact between children who are looked after and their parents, sisters and brothers, any relative, friend or other person connected with the child unless it is not reasonably practicable or consistent with the child's welfare.
- Contact with significant people may have been lost and consideration should be given as to how this can be re-established.
- Where children have moved on from care givers, contact should be maintained unless this is not in the child's interests. Sometimes, following an unplanned ending feelings are high and it is important that children and young people have an opportunity to repair damaged relationships and contact should always be considered to say goodbyes and to give the opportunity for future ongoing relationships.
- Contact must always be for the benefit of the child and not the parent/relative or friend.
- Contact should only be supervised where it is necessary to ensure children are safeguarded and their welfare promoted.
- Where contact needs to be supervised then this is better if it can be undertaken by someone familiar to the child, an extended family member, friend or a key worker / care giver wherever possible.
- The role of the foster carer in contact should be carefully considered in the planning stages of contact. All Foster Carers/ caregivers have a role to play in contact/family time. Wherever possible Foster Carers should transport and support with contact/family time arrangements, including supervision of contact/family time. This should be arranged in a planned way in consultation with the Supervising Social Worker and allocated Social Worker for the child(ren).
- Any transport arrangements should allow plenty of time for the child or young person to enable them to arrive on time and feeling as relaxed as possible and so that the time with their family is not reduced because of transport getting them there late. Equally, any travel arrangements made for the journey back should allow the full time for contact. If transport arrives before the end of the session, there should not be the expectation that the child or young person will leave earlier than planned.
- Contact should take place in venues that are appropriate for children and young people; given their ages and who they are meeting up with. An office building is not usually a good place to have a contact experience.
- Contact should be fun and enjoyable for children and young people but not necessarily costly. Consideration should be given to spending money wisely. Where there are discounts on activities and locations available for contact, these should be utilised wherever possible. The

allocated social worker should notify Placement Service Admin Inbox of child(ren) being placed in foster carer in order to apply for a [Max Card](#). A Max Card can be used for discounted attractions in Leeds for activity sessions.

- Children and young people have a choice about who they wish to see and have the right to change their minds about this over time.
- Maintaining contact with sisters and brothers from both the same or different parents is reported by children to be one of their highest priorities and every effort must be made to ensure this is supported.
- Leeds is committed to restorative (or relational) practice. Having contact with family members is consistent with our restorative principles and contact should be undertaken in line with this approach.
- The Family Group Conference as a decision making forum can be helpful in agreeing a plan for supporting contact.
- Contact should not be seen as a reward or punishment and should be a child's right to have contact, unless this is not in the best interest of the child.
- Contact should be reviewed regularly to ensure that this continues to meet children's needs.

Supervised contact and cancelling contact

Where supervised contact takes place, the detailed arrangements for the supervision must be set out in the Placement Plan.

In addition, there should be a written agreement with the parents and other parties having supervised contact, signed by them, which should state clearly any specific conditions relating to the contact and any expectations placed on the parents. The staff/carers and any other person involved in the supervision of the contact should have copies of the Placement Plan and the agreement with the parents

Wherever possible, the staff/carer should consult the child's social worker in advance if they consider there is a good reason to cancel the contact. If contact is cancelled, the social worker or, if the social worker is not available, the staff/carer must ensure that the child and, as far as practicable, the parent is informed in advance and that the reason for the decision is explained. The social worker or staff/carer should arrange an alternative contact. If contact does not take place and consultation has not been possible with the social worker, the staff/carer must inform the child's social worker as soon as possible and confirm in writing the decision to cancel and the reason.