

# **Placement Support Protocol**

## **July 2018**

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#### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The purpose of this protocol is to address difficulties and potential disruptions in long-term fostering and adoptive placements. A continuing focus on stable placements is critical in order to achieve better outcomes for children who are in our care.
- 1.2 This does not mean that all placements on the verge of disruption should be maintained. There will be some instances where maintaining a placement would not be in the child's interests. This protocol will help social care professionals to work through difficult issues when confronted with a potential disruption and help plan for a secure future of the child.
- 1.3 For the purpose of this protocol, 'disruption' is seen as the premature ending of an adoptive or long-term foster placement. This protocol will also be relevant for time-limited and task centred child care arrangements. The word 'disruption' is used in preference to the term 'break-down'. When a placement cannot continue, it is not a break-down but a disruption of the family placement process. 'Placement Support Meeting' is used in this protocol in preference to the commonly

used term 'pre-disruption meetings' as the latter assumes that factors leading to vulnerability are automatically leading to a potential disruption in the placement. It is important to recognise the stress in bringing up children in families, particularly children in care, many of whom may have suffered from significant harm in the past.

- 1.4 Imminent disruption need not be the only reason for convening a placement support meeting; this protocol can be invoked to develop or fine-tune care plans and support for placements where the placement is under stress or failing to meet the child's needs and for planning for the next placement where disruption is inevitable or desired. Placement support meetings can be used for making plans for the rehabilitation / reunification of the child with their family and for developing family contact in order to support placements.

## **2. Indicators of Placement Vulnerability**

- 2.1. A useful checklist of indicators of placement vulnerability for Social Workers, Independent Reviewing Officers (IROs) and Child Protection (CP) Chairs is provided below. This list is not exhaustive but brings together information from a range of research documents.

### Babies and infants

The research in these areas is not compelling but the most commonly identified features are as follows:

- Failure to connect emotionally
- Unable to draw comfort
- Air of bewilderment
- Uncontrollably crying
- Poor feeding / sleep patterns
- Unusual or extreme reaction to family contacts

### Older children:

- Lack of emotional investment
- 'hard to reach'
- Conflict with household members / placement peers
- Multiple previous placements, including disrupted placements
- Absences / running away
- Education disruption / school refusal or unexplained absences
- Vulnerability to 'pull' features
- Onset of substance / alcohol misuse
- Victim of exploitative behaviours

- Onset of offending behaviour
- Mood swings or low mood
- Sleep deprivation
- Self-imposed isolation
- Aggressive behaviours
- Concerning friendship groups

Children living in vulnerable placements need intensive support and the best outcomes are achieved when this is delivered early. Once a pattern of placement vulnerability indicators is identified, the Social Work Team must respond with urgency and rigour, following the protocol outlined in this document.

- 2.2. As part of the IRO's ongoing role of monitoring the child's case, the IRO is responsible for ensuring that any identified concerns about placement vulnerability are escalated using the resolution process and ensuring the placement support meeting process is followed.

### **3. Placement Support Meetings**

- 3.1 The aim of placement support meetings is to assess the placement and, if there are no clear reasons to move the child from the placement, to ascertain what support is required and available to consolidate the placement.

- 3.2 The purpose of the meeting is to:

- demonstrate support for the child and the carers;
- identify issues leading to placement difficulties;
- share and acknowledge feelings rather than apportion blame;
- hear and understand the child's wishes and feelings;
- find ways to move on;
- agree the child's and the carers' current needs;
- make plans to provide for needs or to state clearly if any needs cannot be met;
- set time limits for action and dates to monitor progress;
- leave the door open for continuation or disruption.

- 3.3 A placement support meeting is distinct from a LAC Review or a planning meeting with a discrete and independent status. The child (given their age and understanding), the carers and the social worker need to be involved in drawing up the agenda and thinking about the

issues such as where the meeting should be convened and who should be present. This is to ensure a sense of ownership of the process and thus the outcomes.

#### **4. Convening the meeting**

- 4.1 Where it is recognised that standards of care or the child's behaviour is contributing to vulnerability of the placement and possibly leading to disruption there must be a discussion between the social worker, social work manager and the designated IRO about convening a Placement Support Meeting.
- 4.2 The child should attend if at all possible. Certainly, in all cases the child must be given the opportunity to contribute their wishes and feelings (given their age and understanding) , prior to any move. If the child is of sufficient age and understanding, and opposes the views of the local authority's intention to move them from the placement, then the child should be encouraged to seek support from the Children's Rights Officer or the National Advocacy Safety Net and Advice Service 'Always Heard' provided by Coram Voice <http://coramvoice.org.uk/young-peoples-zone/always-heard>
- 4.3 The Placement Support Meeting must be held prior to any decisions being made about changing the placement in an unplanned way (i.e. without the agreement of the IRO/LAC Review), except in circumstances where the child is likely to suffer from significant harm arising from a recent or immediate incident or which arise from the carer/s terminating the placement.

#### **5. Membership of the Placement Support Meeting and process**

- 5.1 Membership of the Placement Support Meeting is as follows:
  - Independent Reviewing Officer
  - Children's Rights Officer (where appropriate)
  - Child (given their age and understanding)
  - Social Worker
  - Personal Adviser (where appropriate)
  - Team or Practice Manager
  - Carer
  - Supervising, Residential Social Worker and / or Key Worker

- Parents (if appropriate) and other significant family members especially those having contact with the child.
  - Representative from Children's Placements Team (CPT) capable of making decisions within the meeting concerning resources.
  - Any other person deemed essential or able to make a significant and relevant contribution to the meeting by the IRO or the Social Worker e.g. representative from education
- 5.2 The IRO and the social worker /manager should agree the agenda prior to the meeting and identify the concerns leading to placement vulnerability.
- 5.3 The Group Manager for the IRO Service must be notified by the IRO and the social work team that a placement support meeting is being convened. All placement support meetings will be logged by the Group Manager to enable dip sampling and bi-annual reporting.
- 5.4 ***Where ever possible, the IRO will act as the Chair.*** This will ensure that the discussion and social work decisions remain in line with the principles, aims and objectives of the care plan. It will also counter the practice of moving the child prior to informing the IRO.
- Acting as Chair for the placement support meeting will enable the IRO to act proactively and quickly should they believe that the social work response to placement vulnerability and any plan to move the child is not consistent with either the care plan or the interests of the child.
- 5.5. The CPT will ensure that the IRO is informed whenever they receive a referral about a placement change for a child.
- 5.6. The final decisions about resources will remain with the allocated social work team.
- 5.7 Where a child is accommodated under Section 20 Children Act 1989 the parent plays a crucial role in the meeting. Therefore, it is important that the parent is fully consulted prior to the meeting. The reason for the child not living at home may preclude the direct participation of the parent but the parent will still need to be informed of the meeting and its decisions. If it is appropriate then an advocate can represent the parent.

- 5.5 Where the child is subject to a Care Order, the role and presence of the parent in a placement support meeting will need to be evaluated by the Chair and social work team in light of the care plan.
- 5.6 The Chair will outline the recommendations of the meeting and, if necessary, provide a brief summary. The social work team is responsible for keeping a record of the meeting, using the Placement Support Meeting Report Template (see appendix 1).
- 5.7 The recommendations from the Placement Support Meeting will form an intervention and support plan that will have clear time-scales, contingency plans and objectives. These will be discussed and reviewed in the next LAC Review.
- 5.8 Should the reason for the meeting be caused by concerns about the standard of care then an explicit written agreement must be drawn up that details the concern. The agreement must be signed by the Placement Service/Supervising Social Worker, Carer and the Social Worker. The Children's Placement Team will make the final decision as to the standards and action that should be contained in the written agreement. Foster Carers can use the complaints procedure should they disagree with the action taken and/or agreed.
- 5.9 In some instances the Fostering and Adoption Team will need to consider whether to bring forward the annual review of the carer(s). The London Borough of Tower Hamlets Fostering Procedures, The Fostering Regulations and the associated Children Act and Adoption Act guidance provide reference points as to how action should be taken forward. A similar process will be started in line with the National Minimum Standards for Residential Children's Homes.
- 5.10 Where the reason for the meeting is the child/young person's behaviour, (ideally) a written agreement should be drawn up with the involvement of the child/young person and, where appropriate, his parent(s) and signed by them. Where this is not possible given the volatile nature of the situation a consensus will be summarised and incorporated into the Placement Support Meeting record. The reason for not completing a formal signed agreement will need to be made explicit in the review record.
- 5.11 The contingency plan should allow for a placement planning meeting (which could be convened quickly and more flexibly) before any decision to move the child/young person from placement is made.

- 5.12 A further meeting, should this be required, will review the plans/written agreements made from the first meeting, and decide whether the placement remains viable.
- 5.13 If the placement remains viable, the plan will be reviewed in the next LAC Review.
- 5.14 If the placement is no longer viable the record of both meetings held will need to be sent within **3 working days** of the meeting to:
- The Group Manager for the IRO Team
  - Group Manager and/or Service Manager for the Social Work Team
  - Group Manager CPT
  - Team Manager
  - Social Worker
- 5.15 The final decision about the change in placement will reside with the allocated social work team manager. The IRO will be informed about the decision immediately by the designated manager. Where the IRO disagrees with the decision then s/he has the right to challenge the decision under the IRO Resolution Process and request that the local authority freeze the placement move. Until this is resolved the status quo as far as the placement should remain.
- 5.16 Where a young person of sufficient age and understanding opposes the decision to end the placement, the IRO/SW should encourage them to contact the Children's Rights Officer or the National Advocacy Safety net and Advice Service 'Always Heard'. If the child supports the making of a referral, then the status quo will remain until this process is resolved.
- 5.17 The Group Manager of the IRO Service will provide a bi-annual report to the CSCMT summarising the trends and practice issues associated with Placement Support Meetings. This report will be based upon regular dip sampling.

## **6. Disruption meetings**

- 6.1 If, following a placement support meeting, the placement breaks down a Disruption Meeting should be considered by the IRO, the Social Worker and the Team Manager, following the relevant procedures and guidance. Where a child has been subject to two placement

breakdowns within a 12-month period, a Disruption Meeting must be held. This will look at the precipitating factors leading to breakdown in both instances and what can be done to prevent these contributing to a subsequent placement breakdown

## **7. Child Protection Concerns**

- 7.1 When the factors leading to placement breakdown are deemed as falling within the child protection procedures then the Placement Support Meeting Protocol will come to a halt until the outcome of the enquiries are completed.

## **8. Specific Issues**

- 8.1 Where a placement change has occurred due to the termination of a contract between the department and a provider this will not require a placement support meeting if the reason for placement change is purely based on the ending of the contract. An example of this is when providers of rented accommodation to 16 to 18 year olds take their properties out of the renting market.
- 8.2 Children are frequently moved to a placement on an emergency basis. This can be for a number of reasons including unplanned entry into the care system or a breakdown of a placement, In these circumstances, the IRO should ensure that placements do not become longer term placements by default. The IRO will need to assured that the needs of the child can be met in the emergency placement and that all required services will be provided from partner agencies, within the child's timescale.

A series of placement moves for a child is not desirable but, equally, neither is retaining a placement that does not adequately meet a child's needs.

## **9. Preparing for Placement Change**

- 9.1 When a Placement Support Meeting decides that the placement can continue with support but there may be a chance of breakdown in the future, a discussion should take place between the social worker and the Children's Placement Team to develop a contingency plan. This should identify the profile of carer to be sought in the event of a future



break down e.g. length of experience, locality, age of other children if any, continuation of schooling, etc.

- 9.2 When it is agreed that the child needs to be moved from the existing placement a planned move should be aimed for, unless due to child protection or welfare concerns the child needs to be moved urgently.

Ending placements should be as carefully planned as introductions to placements. The expectation is that carers will wish to and be capable of helping the child to move on in a successful manner.

- 9.3 The following issues will need to be discussed:

- Who will say what, when and where to the child (given their age and understating and the level of participation within the meeting).
- How and when will the move take place?
- Who will take or collect the child (are two people needed for car journeys, one to drive and one to concentrate on the child?)
- How will clothes and other belongings be transferred?
- How will the continuity for the child be maintained (e.g. in terms of friends, any future contact with the carers etc)?

For more information please refer to '*Dealing with Disruption*', Heidi Sargent and Jeffrey Coleman, 2012 CoramBAFF

<https://corambaaf.org.uk/books/dealing-disruption>

## Appendix 1

### PLACEMENT SUPPORT MEETING RECORD

Name of Child	
FWi N°	
Name of Carer	
Address of Carer	
Date of Placement	
Legal Status	
Date of Meeting	

Present:	

Apologies:	

*Please make sure we hear the child's voice throughout the document*

#### **Headlines**

*Capture the reason for the child or young person being in care / their*

*experiences / trauma / impact*

**What's working well in the placement?**

**What concerns are there about the placement?**

*Consider harm and impact*

**What needs to happen? (Targets)**

Action	By Whom?	When?

**Placement Stability Scale** (0 = very concerned, 10 = no concerns)

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Ask participants to comment about the number they have given.

**Comments from the IRO**

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Notes completed and distributed to:	
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