



Children's Safeguarding and Family Help

Corporate Parenting Service

Contact for looked after children: practice
guidance

Contact policy

1 Introduction

This document provides practice guidance for social workers who are putting contact arrangements in place for looked after children and should be read together with the *Contact with parents, adults and siblings* policy. [Contact with Parents/Adults and Siblings](#)

Contact is defined as any form of communication between the child and any member of their kinship network, including parents, grandparents, siblings, former carers and other significant people in the child's life. It may be direct, (face to face) or indirect (ie: telephone, letter, email, videos). Where it is considered necessary for the child's safety and welfare, contact may be formally supervised.

As the subject of contact may involve strong emotions, it is important that it is properly managed and that parents, carers and children are aware of arrangements and receive support to manage contact and make the experience as positive as possible.

2 Standards for contact

- Contact arrangements are focussed on the needs of the child and can safeguard and promote their welfare.
- Wherever possible, contact arrangements are negotiated between CSFH, parents and other significant people without recourse to the courts.
- All parties who have an interest in contact arrangements are actively involved in discussion and agreement of arrangements.
- The child's wishes regarding contact are ascertained and acted upon where this is reasonable, having regard for their age and understanding.
- Direct contact should be the preferred form of contact unless there are good reasons not to.
- Supervised contact is only used where necessary to protect the child from further harm or abuse or to carry out assessment of the child/parent relationship.

3 Overview of the legal framework for contact

Where the child is accommodated under section 20:

- Contact arrangements should be negotiated between CSFH, parents and other significant people, and social workers should ensure that parents and others are aware that they can seek legal advice regarding contact. It should be noted that any current section 8 order will still be in force and will need to be included in any agreed contact arrangements.
- Contact cannot be limited but must be set at a level that is reasonable, practicable and consistent with the child's welfare. If there is a need to set limits on contact, and a parent/person with parental responsibility is not happy with the level of contact set, legal advice should be sought. Legal advice should also be sought if there are concerns around the child's welfare during contact.

Where the child is subject to a (interim) care order:

- Parents, guardians and those with parental responsibility or with whom the child lived prior to coming into care are entitled to reasonable contact with the child as long as the local authority believes this will safeguard and promote the child's welfare.
- The court can make an order relating to contact arrangements between the child and a named person on the application of:
 - the local authority
 - the child
 - parents, anyone with parental responsibility or anyone with whom the child was living prior to coming into care
 - anyone else who has leave of the court to apply.
- The local authority or the child can also apply to the court for an order terminating contact with a named person.
- The court will scrutinise all contact arrangements during care proceedings and may make an order relating to contact when making the final care order.
- When making an order the court may attach conditions to contact and may vary or discharge an order on the application of the local authority, the child or anyone else named in the order.

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- Any previous order relating to contact with the child made under section 8 of the Children Act 1989 will be discharged automatically once a care order is granted and new contact arrangements will need to be put in place.

4 Assessment and consultation

- Assessment and consultation are the main processes by which social workers should gather information to make informed decisions on contact arrangements.
- Assessment should explore:
 - the strength of the attachment/relationship between the child and the individual
 - the child's need for contact
 - how contact with named individuals could benefit the child and help implement their care plan
 - any potential risks to the child posed by contact with named individuals.
- A risk assessment should also be carried out where there is any history of abuse so that any arrangements can ensure a minimal risk of further abuse during contact. Supervised contact may be considered in these situations, as well as using indirect forms of contact.
- Social workers should also consult with the child, their parents and the wider kinship network to ascertain their views on contact. Children may have strong views on who they wish to have contact with and they may want contact with people outside of their immediate family; it is important that they are able to maintain the relationships that they value.
- Children's views should also be taken into account when they express a clear wish **not** to have contact with an individual and they should not be forced to take part in contact that they strongly oppose.
- Consultation can provide an opportunity to explore attitudes towards contact which may be important for ensuring its success. It may be that the child or their parents are ambivalent about contact for many reasons such as guilt or fear of rejection. Consultation can enable them to discuss and address these fears.
- Social workers should be aware that sometimes, contact can become a source of conflict in families as there may be problematic relationships and competing interests. Kinship placements in particular may present some difficulties in this context.

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- In these circumstances, social workers need to ensure that family members recognise that the child's needs must remain in focus against any competing wishes, and that levels of contact must be reasonable and practicable. Social workers should also ensure that family and friends carers are given extra support to deal with issues arising from contact.

5 Purpose of contact

All contact should have a clearly defined purpose which should be identified during assessment and may be one or more of the following:

- Contact enables children to remain connected with their past, provides them with a sense of their own identity and helps them to come to terms with their experiences, thus helping to build their resilience. This is particularly important where children are subject to permanent care arrangements such as adoption.
- Contact is crucial to maintaining the child's relationship and attachments with their birth parents and family, whether the child's permanence plan is rehabilitation or another permanence option such as adoption.
- Children often worry about their parents and family when they are separated following accommodation, particularly if they have been young carers; contact can offer them reassurance.
- Where rehabilitation is the overall care plan for the child, contact can provide social workers with important evidence to support this plan and an opportunity to carry out work with parents and children to build on relationships and attachments in order to achieve desired outcomes.
- Contact can support the child's placement and ensure its stability by providing a framework of partnership working between parents and carers, as well as giving carers an opportunity to find out more about the child.
- Arrangements for contact should reflect the purpose of contact; for example, where there is on-going work with the child and parent with a view to rehabilitation, direct contact would be the best method of assessing the strength of the relationship and enabling it to continue.

6 Arrangements for contact

People involved

- It is important that children are asked for their views on people they would like to remain in contact with and their wishes should be met as far as this is consistent with their welfare. Children may express a wish to remain in contact with former carers, and this should be permitted but social workers should balance this against the need to support the current placement.
- For children moving to permanent placements, social workers should consider a referral to the Life-Long Links project in order to support the process of identifying all those with whom the child wishes to retain long-term links. [Life long links | Children's Policy & Practice Hub](#)

Contact with siblings

- It is particularly important that children have contact between siblings who remain at home or are placed separately as these relationships will be the most enduring for a child. Such contact provides continuity and stability, promotes resilience and self-esteem and helps them to deal with change.
- Where possible, it is Camden's policy to place siblings together unless assessment shows that this is not consistent with their welfare. However, siblings need to be placed separately or a child is separated from a sibling who remains at home, social workers and the IRO will ensure the following:
 - robust arrangements are in place to ensure a high level of quality contact to support the healthy development of sibling relationships and that these are understood by the children, parents and carer;
 - children will be given a clear, age-appropriate explanation as to why they are unable to live with their sibling;
 - children will be given an explanation where contact arrangements do not go ahead or change;
 - the statutory CLA review carefully considers sibling contact and its impact on the child to ensure it continues to meet their needs.

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Frequency and duration

- Levels of contact should be kept to a reasonable level that is manageable for the child. Contact should not interfere with other areas of the child's life, for example education, and should not be at such a level as to make it difficult for the child to settle into their placement and form a relationship with their carer.
- Parents may confuse high levels of contact with better outcomes but research shows that there is no real correlation. However, a high frequency of contact is associated with a child's eventual return home. Where rehabilitation is the permanence plan, increasing the frequency and duration of contact prior to the return can help support this.

Type of contact

- Social workers will need to decide what form contact will take and most children are likely to have a mixture of direct and indirect contact. Consideration should be given to what type of indirect contact should be arranged, for example, telephone calls, emails or videos.
- Social workers need to be aware that indirect contact such as contact via social media can be difficult to monitor and may expose the child to continued abuse. Where indirect forms of contact are being considered, attention needs to be given to how the contact can be controlled and monitored.
- Parents need to be made aware of any rules regarding contact, which should be set out in the contact plan, and any contingency plans that will be put in place should these rules not be adhered to.

Venue

- The contact venue should be carefully considered as this can have a profound effect on the quality of contact and whether its stated purpose can be achieved. Venues should be capable of providing the correct structure for supervision and/or assessment of contact but should also take into account the needs of the child, particularly disabled children.
- Contact may also be arranged around an activity rather than a location, which may be particularly useful where work is being carried out to enhance the child/parent attachment through therapeutic means, or where an assessment of parenting skills is being carried out prior to rehabilitation.
- The following research provides some insight into the impact of venue on contact:

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- **the parental home** is the preferred option of most parents and children, and will be useful where there is a strong indication that the child will return home in a short timescale. It could be the preferred option for older children where there is no history of abuse and risk assessment indicates it is a safe option.
 - **the fostering or residential placement** can be a safer option for those children where some degree of monitoring or oversight is required, though parents may find placements inhibiting.
 - **council offices** are regarded as inhibiting and can create an artificial situation as participants are likely to feel that they are being “watched”. This can seriously affect the outcome of any assessment of the contact being conducted, resulting in inaccurate observations.
 - **specialist contact centres** can overcome the above problems by providing a neutral venue that enables supervision and assessment of contact and helps children and parents to engage fully.
- Contact with parents **in prison** should be encouraged as long as it is in the child’s best interests. Prison establishments will carry out a risk assessment of the parent to establish what level and type of contact, if any, will be allowed. Social workers should refer to the London Safeguarding Children procedures for further details. [PG36. Prison Visits](#)
 - Contact with parents **on psychiatric wards** will be subject to a joint risk assessment carried out by the child’s social worker and the relevant mental health team to decide whether contact is in the child’s best interest. Social workers should refer to the Camden and Islington Mental Health Trust policy and the London Safeguarding board procedures for further details. [PG37. Psychiatric Ward Visits](#)
 - It is essential that children are properly prepared by their social worker before visits to parents in prison or hospital, given the possible negative psychological impact.

Supporting contact

- Parents and others may need financial help from CSFH to participate in contact, and the division is obliged to provide financial support to cover the costs of contact where this would otherwise cause financial hardship.
- Costs that should be provided for are travel costs, costs of any activities that are part of the contact plan or extra costs arising from extended stays at home.

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- Contact can often be an emotional experience for parents and children and social workers should ensure that support is provided to help them deal with any distress.
- Foster carers and residential workers may also require help in dealing with distress and/or deteriorating behaviour following contact. They should be made aware of their role in enhancing the experience of contact, and children's social workers and supervising social workers should support and prepare them.
- This should involve discussing the purpose of contact and what is expected of the foster carer or residential worker in terms of preparing children for contact and reassuring them following contact.
- Social workers should also ensure that parents receive support to prepare for contact and are given reassurance following contact. These arrangements should be recorded in the contact plan.
- Social workers should also be particularly sensitive to the needs of Kinship carers who may be called on to implement contact arrangements where there are high levels of family conflict due to their caring role.

7 Monitoring contact

- All contact needs to be monitored to ensure its quality and that it continues to keep the child safe. The degree of oversight will be relative to the level of support required by children and parents, the perceived risk contact poses to the child, and the need to assess child/parent interactions.
- Decisions on what level of oversight best suits an individual case must be based on information obtained from assessment, including any risk assessment. Social workers need to constantly review all contact arrangements and consider formal supervision of contact where it appears that current arrangements are not able to guarantee the child's safety or welfare, particularly following any concerning incident taking place during contact or where parent's circumstances change negatively.
- Every contact plan should include arrangements for monitoring contact, including the name of the person responsible, the level and form of monitoring required, and the person to whom they should report any problems.
- Care should be given to how indirect forms of contact such as telephone calls and emails will be monitored, and the foster carer or other person responsible for monitoring should be made aware of what action to take if it appears that contact is not safe for the child or is not occurring within agreed boundaries.

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- Particular care and consideration should be given to unsupervised contact between CLA and others via social media as this may enable the continuation of abuse. Social workers, supervising social workers and foster carers and key workers should consider if there is any risk in such contact and what action can be taken to reduce the risk, such as limiting a child's access to social media sites.

Unsupervised contact

- Unsupervised contact is likely to be the main choice where the child's long term care plan is rehabilitation home and where assessment shows that there is no risk to the child and there is no need to assess the quality of parenting or interactions between the child and their parents.
- Unsupervised contact will have few conditions attached, will involve limited or no intervention from social work staff or foster carers, and may involve the family going out for day trips alone.
- However, there must be some form of post-contact monitoring in place, for example observing the child's response and mood following contact, to ensure that the contact remains beneficial to the child and that the arrangements continue to support the overall care plan.

Supported contact

- Assessment may show that although the conditions for unsupervised contact are fulfilled, parents or the child may require a third party to be present or at least available to provide support and facilitate contact.
- This may be the case where parents require some help with practical parenting, perhaps linked to a child's disability, or where the parent and child have had a strong attachment in the past but have been separated for a while. Contact between siblings may also require some support, with a worker providing suitable supervised activities.

Supervised contact

- Supervised contact is carried out by family support workers (FSW) based in the Supervised Contact Service. To refer, social workers should complete the supervised contact referral form (available on MOSAIC). This will provide a realistic risk assessment of the adults to be involved in supervised contact.
- The risk assessment may also inform the choice of venue; this is particularly the case where there is a risk of violence and aggression and a suitable venue needs to be used.

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- Once the referral has been accepted, the Supervised Contact Service senior practitioner should convene a meeting with the CLA social worker, allocated FSW and family members to draw up the written contact agreement and discuss how contact will be carried out.
- Families should be informed about what will happen should there be any concerns, and under what circumstances the contact session may not go ahead, for example, if a parent arrives to contact under the influence of drugs or alcohol or is unacceptably late.
- If the Supervised Contact Service is unable to accept the referral because of heavy workloads, the Resources service will identify an alternative supervisor and venue.

Foster carers

- Foster carers may supervise contact where this is appropriate and it can be demonstrated that they have the relevant knowledge and experience. This may be a particularly suitable option where the carer has built up a good relationship with the parent.
- The question of whether or not a foster carer is competent to supervise contact in an individual case should be decided between the child's social worker, the foster carer, their supervising social worker and the manager of the Fostering service.
- If the child's foster carer is to supervise contact, the matter needs to be discussed with them and their supervising social worker as early as possible, preferably prior to the placement starting. The placement agreement meeting should be used to discuss detailed arrangements for supervision and drawing up the written agreement with parents.
- The agreement should make it clear what is expected of the foster carer, what support will be offered to them by their supervising social worker and the child's social worker, and what action they should take if it appears that they feel unable to protect the child sufficiently during contact.

8 Reviewing contact arrangements

- Contact arrangements should be formally reviewed at every statutory CLA review. Any information arising from contact sessions, including any written reports should be made available to the IRO in advance of the review meeting.
- Where problems arise between statutory reviews that require immediate action, this should be discussed between the social worker, their manager and the child's IRO, and any action agreed should be recorded on the child's case record and notified to all those affected by the decision.

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- The statutory CLA review should consider contact arrangements at each review, looking at:
 - the purpose of contact and whether it has changed in the light of any changes to the child's overall care plan
 - whether arrangements are working well or need to be changed, and whether this can be done by agreement or by application to the court
 - where the child is subject to a care order, whether any application to the court is needed for an order under section 34 to restrict, suspend or terminate contact
 - whether the arrangements for monitoring contact are robust enough
 - whether supervised contact should remain supervised. Risk assessments regarding contact should also be reviewed as part of this process.
- Decisions on contact should be based on information provided from records of contact written by those responsible for monitoring or supervising contact, and the views of the child, their parents and anyone else who has contact with the child.
- Reviews of **supervised contact** should be held every 4-6 weeks at a specially convened meeting, and a record of discussion and outcomes recorded on the supervised contact review record (available on MOSAIC).
- The meeting should be attended by:
 - The child's social worker and their supervisor/team manager
 - The FSW and their supervisor
 - The Resources manager responsible for the supervised contact service
 - The child's parents and any other person affected by supervised contact.
- Where contact is supervised by the foster carer, the carer and their supervising social worker should attend the meeting.
- The Supervised Contact Service manager is responsible for completing the review record, which should be distributed to all parties and uploaded onto the child's MOSAIC record.

9 Terminating, suspending or restricting contact

- Any decision to terminate, suspend or restrict contact must be discussed with the manager and legal advice sought. Parents and children must be consulted before any action is taken and made aware of their right to seek legal advice and to make a complaint.

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- Authorisation must be obtained from the service manager or Corporate Parenting Head of Service and a record of discussions and written confirmation of their decision on the matter should be recorded on the child's MOSAIC record.
- Written notice of termination, suspension or restriction of must be sent to all those affected by the changes giving details of the changes to arrangements and who to contact if they are unhappy with the decision.
- If it appears that the new arrangements will need to continue beyond 7 days, an application should be made to the court for an order under section 34 to terminate, suspend or restrict contact. CSFH will need to provide evidence to the court of the need to safeguard and promote the child's welfare, and that all efforts have been made to reach an agreement.
- Evidence may include:
 - the need to safeguard the child from contact with known abusers in order to prevent further abuse
 - the child refuses to take part in planned contact
 - the need to restrict the frequency and duration of contact in order to support the placement and enable the child to establish routines and relationships
 - the need to provide parents with space and time to address their own issues as part of the overall care plan
 - the need to limit contact that may be distressing to the child due to traumatic experiences or disordered attachments.

10 Recording contact details

- All looked after children should have a **contact plan** (available on MOSAIC under the documents button).
- For **unsupervised contact**, social workers are responsible for drawing up the contact plan and obtaining the agreement of all parties following the consultation process. Social workers should record information on unsupervised contact sessions in case notes in order to provide an overview of how contact is progressing and whether arrangements need to be changed so that it remains beneficial to the child.
- Information should include whether contact went ahead and any reasons for it being cancelled, and any incidents that occurred, provided by the person monitoring contact. Feedback from the child and their parents should also be recorded. Foster carers and key workers should hold their own records and provide social workers with a written report that can be uploaded onto MOSAIC.

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- For **supervised contact**, the Supervised Contact Service manager should draw up the contact plan as set out above. Social workers should ensure that case notes record whether supervised contact took place and refer to the formal record of the supervised contact.
- In addition to this, FSW's and others who are responsible for supervising contact sessions should complete a record of supervised contact form (available on MOSAIC).
- Notes taken by workers who are supervising contact can contain information that makes it possible to identify the child, a parent or carer or the whereabouts of any of these. Supervised contact notes are likely to be produced at court during proceedings and this could result in a breach of confidentiality which can put children and foster carers at risk and some parents may be put at risk if they are domestic abuse victims.
- To avoid this, when writing up notes, workers should make sure that they do not use:
 - Full names of those involved in the contact
 - Any addresses of anyone involved in the contact, or the area where they live
 - Any addresses of any place that anyone involved in contact visits regularly, for example work, school, rehab etc.
- Instead workers should use:
 - First names only for children, and for clarity adults should be referred to by the relationship, for example mum, dad, foster carer
 - A description of the place, for example placement, work, school, rehabilitation.
- All contact details should be recorded on the child's ***care plan and the placement agreement record***.

11 Withholding the placement address

- The Children Act 1989 states that local authorities should take all reasonable steps to keep parents informed of the child's whereabouts, but a child's placement address may be withheld from parents where the child is subject to an interim or full care order, and there are reasonable grounds for believing that disclosure of the address would not be consistent with their safety or welfare.
- A decision on whether or not a placement address should be withheld from parents lies with the social worker but should be authorised by their manager. The decision and the reasons for doing so should be recorded on the child's MOSAIC case record, and parents should be given a full explanation as to why CSFH has taken this step.