



Children's Safeguarding and Family Help

Reunification practice guidance

Camden's Children and Learning Directorate uses relational practice as the foundation for all our work. Our integrative relational practice framework is based on our values, and is designed to help achieve the Directorate's purpose: to work with children, families and communities to make a positive, lasting difference to their futures, so they have the best start in life.

We recognise the impact of structural inequalities on the lives of the children and families we work with and as a service we will embrace inclusive, anti-discriminatory and anti-racist practice based on our values and our mission to champion social justice.

Our practice framework centres on honest and compassionate relationships with those we serve and with each other. It is an expectation that all Directorate policies and procedures are implemented in line with our practice framework, and that any actions within policies and procedures reflect its ethics, values and practice expectations.

1 Introduction

- This document provides guidance for social work practice around reunification and should be read together with the *Ceasing to look after a child* policy. [Ceasing to Look After a Child](#)
- The guidance is based on the NSPCC reunification practice framework available at the link below and it is an expectation that social workers follow this practice framework for all cases involving reunification. <https://ascpractice.camden.gov.uk/media/3272/reunification-practice-framework-guidance.pdf>
- Please note that this practice framework only applies to cases where the **child will no longer be looked after** following the return home. Where a **child who remains subject to a care plan is to be placed at home with parents**, social workers should refer to the division's policy on placement with parents. [placement-with-parents-policy.pdf](#)

2 Principles of reunification practice

Camden believes that in general, children achieve better outcomes where they are brought up within their family therefore:

- Children will only be looked after for as long as necessary to achieve permanence, whether this is by returning home to their family or moving to an alternative permanent placement.
- Reunification will only be pursued where this is in the child's best interests and is likely to be successful.
- Decisions on reunification will be made in a timeframe that is right for the child and will be based on thorough assessment that shows parents are able to keep the child safe and meet their needs.
- Reunification will be considered as early as possible when the child has become looked after and throughout the child's care journey and will be carefully planned within the care planning process.
- All children who return home from care will be children in need for at least 3 months following reunification and must receive a child in need service to support the return and monitor the child's welfare. Social workers should refer to the Child in need plans and reviews policy: [Child in Need Plans and Reviews](#)

The **principles underpinning practice** are:

- Reunification practice will be child-focussed and will promote the child’s welfare, particularly their emotional welfare.
- Children’s voices will be central to decision-making and all decisions will be taken in a timeframe that is right for the child.
- Work with parents will be sensitive, respectful and collaborative and will help them engage in the process of reunification.
- Social workers will ensure parents are aware of what changes need to be made and how CSFH will support them to make these changes in a reasonable timescale.
- Families will be informed of what packages of support will be made available to support reunification and the circumstances under which the child may be returned to care.
- Decision making will be evidenced based using a robust assessment of risk and protective factors within a framework of strong management oversight and objectivity.

3 Decision making framework for reunification

- Good reunification practice requires social workers to make sound professional judgements on whether a looked after child can be safely returned home. To do this, social workers will need to make predictions about future risk and behaviour and assess whether the return is likely to be successful.
- Decisions on reunification should involve the following stages:
 - assessing whether reunification should be pursued as a permanence plan and the likelihood of its success based on risk assessment and parental capacity to change;
 - where reunification will be pursued, working with parents to effect the necessary change in order to reduce risk within a timeframe that is right for the child;
 - re-assessing risk and deciding on the timing and plan for reunification, including support to be provided once the child returns home;

- managing and monitoring the return home and reviewing the success of reunification.
- Decisions made at all stages should be based on a thorough assessment of risk and capacity for change and at any point a decision can be made not to continue with reunification if it is clear it is not in the child's interest.
- The comprehensive reunification practice framework should be followed in cases where reunification decisions are complex because of concerns about whether risk can be reduced and change sustained over time. It is an expectation that in these complex cases an alternative permanence plan is pursued in parallel to reunification in order to maximise good outcomes for the child and achieve permanence in a timely manner.
- However, in cases where reunification is the clear permanence plan from the outset and likely to be achieved in a short timescale, social workers and managers can follow a less onerous version of the framework as long as decisions are well informed by assessment. This may be suitable for example where the child will only be looked after for a short period of time whilst their parents are temporarily unable to care for them and there are no serious concerns about parenting
- A decision to pursue reunification as a child's permanence plan should be taken at the for CLA review and regularly reviewed at each subsequent CLA review. All decisions regarding planning for reunification must be discussed and agreed at the child's CLA review and the agreement of the CLA service manager must be sought before a child can be returned home.
- If there are professional differences about a plan for reunification or either the child or parent strongly objects to such a plan, the social worker and IRO should raise the matter with the CLA service manager and the IRO service manager.

It is a matter of the social worker's professional judgement as to whether reunification should be pursued and when it cannot be pursued because it is unlikely to happen in the child's timeframe.

4 Practice framework

4.1 Assessment of risks, strengths and capacity to change

Stage 1 of the NSPCC reunification practice framework (pages 23-35)

This stage covers the assessment needed to inform decision making on reunification and includes messages from research that can help social workers identify those cases where reunification may be viable. Research indicates that there are some factors and characteristics that may be a precursor to good or poor outcomes or may predict future harm and may be used by social workers to inform decisions.

Please see appendix 1 and pages 24- 28 of the NSPCC reunification practice framework document for more details on messages from research.

- The assessment for reunification should be carried out as part of the child and family assessment or any updated assessment prior to a LAC review.
- The assessment should look at the likelihood of a successful reunification based on:
 - the family’s history, including previous CSFH involvement
 - the views of parents and children regarding reunification
 - the risks and protective factors
 - parental capacity to change.
- Assessments should be carefully planned with supervisors and decisions made on what information is required and the best tools to use. Consideration should also be given to whether independent parenting assessments should be obtained or the use of a parent and child placement in order to assess parenting capacity for a potential reunification.
- It is essential that when assessing for reunification social workers ensure that they have extensive knowledge of the family’s history and prepare a comprehensive chronology that looks back at previous involvement with the family and includes information available from previous assessments as well as information from other agencies.
- Children who return home will be children in need and the child and family assessment will need to be repeated in line with CSFH policy and to reflect the child’s changing status. Social workers should therefore use the child and family assessment template to explore the standard of care the child will receive at home and what support will be needed to ensure the return home is successful.

4.2 Classifying risk and deciding on reunification

Stage 2 of the NSPCC reunification practice framework (pages 37-43)

- This stage helps social workers to classify the level of risk should reunification go ahead, leading to informed and evidence-based decisions using the risk classification table. This can give clear indication as to whether reunification should be pursued and the timescale in which it should happen.
- At this stage social workers may wish to “test” the strength of the case for reunification by seeking a “second opinion” from colleagues. Reflective group supervision provides a good forum for this and will allow a fresh perspective on the evidence for and against reunification.
- The outcome of the assessment should be discussed in supervision initially and at the statutory CLA review debated before a final decision is made by the review. It is essential that children and parents are made aware of any decision on reunification so that:
 - if reunification will go ahead, they are aware of what will happen next, timescales and what they need to do
 - If reunification will not go ahead, they have a clear understanding of why this is.

4.3 Working to achieve change

Stage 3 of the NSPCC reunification practice framework (pages 45-56)

- This stage sets out the work social workers need to carry out in order to:
 - help parents to work towards making the necessary changes required to reduce risks and enable reunification to go ahead by setting clear goals to help motivate them
 - ascertain the child’s wishes and feelings and prepare them for reunification
 - plan a co-ordinated multi-agency package of support for the family once the child returns home and agree how the arrangements will be monitored
 - agree a contingency plan in the event that reunification does not go ahead or fails; this should be part of parallel planning.

- This work should be planned and monitored within the care planning process, and the care plan should detail work that will be carried out with parents to address parental issues and achieve change, with progress on this monitored as part of the statutory CLA review process.
- Social workers may wish to consider using a Family Group Conference to:
 - explore the child and parent’s attitude to reunification and help motivate them towards change
 - ensure the participation of parents in achieving change and planning for reunification, particularly fathers
 - gauge the level of support that may be available from extended family once the child returns home.

4.4 Planning for reunification

Stage 4 of the NSPCC reunification practice framework (pages 57-62)

Social workers should assess the progress made by parents in addressing issues and reclassify risk based on the information. This will help social workers to make informed decisions on whether to proceed with reunification and agree the final plan and package of support.

4.5 Monitoring the return home

Stage 5 of the NSPCC reunification practice framework (pages 63-66)

- This stage covers the final arrangements for the child’s staged return home and the implementation of the child’s CIN plan that includes the services to be provided to support the return. Social workers need to continue to monitor the support given to ensure it remains relevant and adequate and if there are any difficulties for the family in adjusting to the new care arrangements, the professional network is able to respond through flexible planning and service provision.
- The return should be monitored and reviewed through the CIN review process. It is recommended that the IRO chairs the first 6 month review following the return before handing over to a CIN chair as this period is crucial.

5 Unplanned reunification

- In some cases, a child or young person may return home without reunification being planned for; this may happen where parents remove a voluntarily accommodated child from placement or a young person chooses to return home. This will make it more difficult to implement the practice framework.
- All unplanned returns home must be reported to the Corporate Parenting Head of Service and the child or young person's IRO. The statutory CLA review should be brought forward to discuss the matter and decide on what action to take to ensure the child or young person's safety and welfare is promoted and to plan for their future care.
- Social workers should be aware that the return could come under pressure quickly without adequate support as parents and children have not had time to prepare and adjust to the new care arrangements and parents may have difficulties in managing difficult behaviours and there may be issues around attachments.
- It is important that in these cases a repeat child and family assessment is carried out as soon as the child or young person returns home and the reunification practice framework followed as far as this is feasible for the facts of the case. Decisions on whether or not the child or young person should remain at home should be based on this assessment and if the child or young person is to remain, a suitable package of support should be put in place immediately.

6 Support following reunification

It is a statutory requirement that children returning home from the care system are treated as children in need. It is essential that children are subject to a CIN plan that is regularly reviewed and that they have an allocated social worker.

Services and support should be provided as determined by the child's assessed needs and to support parents in their role, but consideration should be given to the following:

- It is essential that a member of the child's professional network is identified with whom the child feels comfortable and would be able to confide in so that they have a voice.
- Parents should have a written agreement that sets out expectations of care standards and which should be signed by them and the allocated social worker.
- In some cases, and where this is practicable, it may be beneficial to involve the child's former foster carer or keyworker in providing support to the child and family.

- Research suggests that help with dealing with children’s emotional and behavioural problems is the support parents found most useful and is the most effective.
- Children and parents may need support to re-establish their relationship, especially if the child has been living away from home for some time: this should be discussed with them and agreed support should be provided and this included in the written agreement.
- Families may need help with practical issues such as benefits or help with getting the child a school place.
- Families should be encouraged to harness positive factors such as support from the extended family.
- Support should remain in place for as long as it is needed and only reduced when it can be demonstrated through updated assessment and a CIN review that the return has been successful.
- Further step-down provision from early help services should be put in place prior to the case being closed by CSFH.

7 Returning to care

- Although CSFH aims to avoid multiple care episodes for looked after children, it is accepted that some children may have to return to the care system following a failed return home.
- Social workers should accept that parents and children may not be open and honest about any difficulties arising from the return. Parents may be concerned that the child may be removed from their care again and there is a risk of non-engagement following the return.
- Careful monitoring of the reunification can help social workers to be aware of when arrangements are in danger of breaking down and where this is likely, a network meeting should be held to look at whether the reunification can be supported and care arrangements can continue to safeguard the child. However, arrangements may break down suddenly and if may be necessary to accommodate the child immediately.

- Where the child does become looked after again, social workers should ensure the child has an opportunity to talk about the experience of the failed reunification and provide emotional support to help them come to terms with this.
- Managers should try to provide some continuity for the child by enabling them to remain allocated to their social worker and allocating the same IRO where possible.

Appendix 1:

Messages from research

- Around 39% of looked after children return home.
- Around 15% of children become looked after again with 12-18 months of reunification and 30% after 5 years.
- Around 46% of children who return home experience abuse or neglect within 2 years of reunification.
- Substance misuse is the most likely reason for children to re-enter care following further harm or abuse.
- Children who return home may experience poorer outcomes than those who remain looked after, especially if they were looked after due to chronic neglect and abuse.
- Children who have experienced a failed return are more likely to experience this again.
- Where children's social care become involved with a family during pregnancy and no substantial change occurs within 6 months, it is unlikely that any required change will take place.
- Younger children are more likely to be re-admitted to care and have a permanence plan involving an alternative long-term carer at the second care episode.

Characteristics most associated with an unsuccessful reunification are:

- poor physical and/or mental health
- behavioural or emotional problems
- child aged over 10 years
- mixed race heritage
- being an infant or a teenager
- birth family in poverty or unstable housing
- single parent with money worries
- parental substance misuse
- presence of domestic abuse
- child looked after due to neglect or abuse
- parental ambivalence to the parenting role or the return home
- lack of social support
- parents facing complex, multiple problems
- multiple placement breakdown
- children placed in residential care
- return to a family where initial problems are unresolved
- long history of family involvement with social services
- previous unsuccessful rehabilitation
- return was not planned for and not part of the current care plan
- poor assessment and weak planning and inadequate service provision on return

Characteristics most associated with a successful reunification are:

- returning home with a sibling
- returning to a changed family composition (ie: abuser has left)
- looked after episodes that involve voluntary accommodation due to family crisis or a planned entry to care
- returning home on a care order
- strong multi-agency working by agencies supporting the return
- good working relationship between the parents, foster carer and social worker
- child and parent positive about the return home and the outcome of the care episode
- staged return that is clearly set out in the care plan with clear expectations for parents
- support for parents to help them address the child's emotional and behavioural issues
- good service provision and support from foster carer
- clear evidence that issues relating to parenting capacity are resolved
- positive contact experiences whilst in care
- good risk assessment that informs decision making and identifies services and support
- purposeful monitoring of return by social worker.