

Guiding Principles for the planning, facilitation and review of Family Time.

For the majority of children, the aim from the outset of their placement will be to reunite them with their family provided that it is safe and practical to do so. Developing and maintaining close links between children and their family is essential in trying to meet this objective.

The local authority has a duty to promote family time and there is a legal presumption (under Section 34 Children Act 1989) of reasonable family time between children in care and their families.

Evidence from research and practice concludes that for most children who are separated from their parents, siblings, or other close relatives, it is in their best interests to have some level of family time with their family. This continues to be the case throughout a child's time in care, other than in cases where the local authority is granted permission to place for adoption.

Even though there is a duty to promote family time, children have the right to be protected from family time which is harmful.

Family time will only be refused when there is clear evidence that it prevents the authority from safeguarding the child's welfare. For children subject to an Interim Care Order or a full Care Order, the local authority can only suspend family time for a limited period (up to a maximum of 7 days) in an emergency. After that period of time, family time can only be prevented by a court order (Section 34(4), Children Act 1989).

Should parents fail to attend family time; every effort will be made to continue to promote family time whilst prioritising the needs and best interests of the child.

Criteria and Service Principles

Whilst not minimising the rights and feelings of the parents, consideration for Family Time arrangements should be made with the needs of the child as the priority.

The Local Authority has a duty to facilitate family time for children Looked After with their families. Whilst the family time team will endeavour to manage any arrangements it is the shared responsibility of the Family Time Team and Social Worker Team to ensure that family time needs are met.

The family time team provide a service of supervised Family Time for children who are Looked After and who are subject to ongoing care proceedings. Any requests for supervised Family Time from the team outside these criteria need to be discussed and agreed with the senior manager of the Family Time Team.

Relevant Legislation

- **The Children Act 1989;**
- **The Adoption and Children Act 2002;**
- **The Children Act 2004;**
- **Data Protection Act 2018;**

Referral

The social worker should make contact with the family time team manager and provide information as requested, whereby Family Time can be determined. This information is later forwarded to the Family Time Support Worker to give them details of the family and any requirements. It is therefore important that this information is detailed and accurate.

When considering requests for family time, the social worker should be mindful about requests for transport. Wherever possible, foster carers will transport, especially at the end of the family time sessions. Family Time can be an emotional experience for a child and it is important that visits are positive and cause minimum distress. A familiar and caring person should be of comfort to the child.

The venue selected for family time should be as close to the child's placement as possible to avoid them travelling an unnecessarily long distance.

When completing the referral, the social worker should be mindful about the level of supervision requested - monitored, observed, assessed or intervention.

- **Monitored - loosely supervised and intervention only as is necessary as to ensure the child's wellbeing;**
- **Observed - where there are concerns that a child may be at risk during family time. The supervisor will be vigilant in their observations and will make notes in the family time regarding the concerns;**
- **Assessed - where the contact is observed and recorded in a structured format to provide information to the social worker for the purpose of analysis and assessment;**
- **Intervention - where family time sessions are used to engage with families for the purpose of development and change, such as parenting skills and child development.**

The family time team manager will ensure the request meets the criteria, in that the child is Looked After and subject to on-going care proceedings, a family time planning meeting will be convened by the allocated social worker with all interested parties present.

In addition to the information needed, the social worker should also complete a risk assessment. The assessment should be clear as to any identified risk and what is expected of the family time supervisor in order to manage the risk. This should include what action to take and at what stage intervention should be taken to stop the family time.

Planning Family Time.

Children, young people and their family should be involved in all decisions relating to family time and their wishes and feelings taken into account.

Family time is an integral part of care planning and must be considered at every stage of the process.

Family time should be compatible with the child's needs taking into account their age, ethnicity, culture, religion and disability.

The planning of family time relates to the care planning for a child and there should be assessment and analysis of:

- **What is the purpose of family time and why is it important for this child and family?**
- **Who should the child have family time with?**
- **What level of supervision is required to promote the family time?**
- **What frequency of family time is required to maintain the child's links with their family?**

The family time plan should be recorded and reviewed in line with associated linked documentation.

- **Placement Plan/Placement Information Record;**
- **The Care Plan;**
- **The Child Looked After Review;**
- **Child and Family Assessment report;**
- **Court statements and/or reports.**

Initial Family Time Planning Meeting

A planning meeting should take place before any family time is agreed. No regular family time will be arranged until a planning meeting has taken place. If needed it may be possible to offer a one off emergency family time until the planning meeting can be arranged.

Prior to a planning meeting, a discussion should take place to consider permanence plans and how family time relates to this.

Prior to a planning meeting the manager will identify whether there is availability of the team to regularly undertake the family time. If the family time team are unable to offer a supervisor at that time, the team, in conjunction with the social worker will attempt to find alternative cover.

Where possible a family time planning meeting should be incorporated into, or held following another meeting, e.g. placement planning meeting or CLA review. This is to keep the number of meetings to a minimum.

The planning meeting should:

- **Enable the parents to discuss any wishes or concerns;**
- **Inform parents what is expected of them in family time;**
- **Explain to parents what specific issues the family time supervisor will be asked to observe;**
- **Clarify practical arrangements;**
- **Complete and sign a written agreement confirming family time details and expectations.**

The parents should also be informed that notes will be taken within the family time which they can read and sign at the end of sessions (there may be exceptions to this and each case will be considered individually).

Family Time Arrangements

Arrangements for family time should be made in line with the family time team protocol.

The responsibility for implementing the family time plan lies with the family time team in conjunction with the child's allocated social worker and includes:

- **Who will be involved in the family time sessions;**
- **Frequency and duration of family time;**
- **Arrangements for supervision and recording of family time;**
- **Any restraints, limits or expectations;**
- **Support arrangements for child and family members;**
- **Completing a risk assessment;**
- **Completing a written agreement and ensuring all parties agree and sign it;**
- **Arrangements for monitoring the family time plan.**
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The responsibility for managing the contact arrangements lies with the family time team and includes:

- **Ensuring there is a suitable venue available;**
- **Co-ordinating transport arrangements;**
- **Providing a written report of each family time session and inputting this on the child's record;**
- **Ensuring any significant information is forwarded to the social worker at the earliest opportunity**

Ensuring the family time agreement is adhered to and any failure to do this is reported to the social worker the earliest opportunity.

Frequency of Family Time

Each request for family time will be considered on an individual basis and takes into account:

- **The child's wishes and feelings;**
- **The Care Plan for the child;**
- **The assessed level of risk to the child;**
- **Clear evidence and analysis of the child's assessed needs.**

In order to offer family time to a maximum number of families the family time team will offer a baseline level of sessions.

- **Babies/pre-school children 3 x weekly**
- **Primary school children 2 x weekly**
- **Secondary school children 1 x weekly**

Any request for family time above this level will need to be facilitated by another source, e.g. social worker, child support officer or approved family member.

The family time team are unable to offer supervised family time on anything less than a once weekly basis unless this coincides with another family time on the alternate week.

On-going family time will be monitored by the family time team manager via supervision with the family time support worker. An overall summary, analysis and impact of sessions will be completed and this will be inputted onto Protocol.

The family time team manager should be invited to the CLA review meeting for each child. Information will be requested from the family time support worker and will be forwarded to the social worker. The manager and/or family time support worker will attend where possible.

Any requests to vary the family time from the regular arrangements; need to be made to the family time team manager and will be considered in line with the family time teams ongoing commitments. **Family Time Support Workers cannot agree to varied arrangements.**

This is essential to assist the family time team to run as efficiently as possible.

The social worker should arrange and undertake a review planning meeting on a 6 weekly basis for each case. Family Time should be reviewed in these meetings and the manager of the family time team should be invited. If the manager or family time support worker is unable to attend then information will be provided to the social worker. The family time team should be informed of the outcome of the meeting and minutes sent.

Particular attention should be given to the family time plan whenever the Care Plan is significantly changed or there is a considerable change of circumstances. Any significant changes to family time should be made within a planning meeting where all professionals involved with the child should be invited.

Discussion should take place with the family time team manager prior to the social worker making any changes to the family time arrangements:

- When making changes to frequency of family time, either increase or reduction;
- Before a court hearing when family time is to be considered.

Missed and Replacement Family Time

There are a number of occasions when family time may not take place;

- Any requests to replace these sessions will be considered on an individual basis given the circumstances of the family at the time. However due to the family time support workers, working to full capacity it is rare that there is availability. Any offer to replace a missed family time will be agreed in the best interest of the child and not solely at the request of the parent

With regard to missed family time, the following principle will apply:

- Should family time not take place due to a Bank Holiday, illness of the child or parent, an appointment of the child or parent and a meeting or court hearing for parents, the family time team will unfortunately be unable to replace this missed session unless there is a cancellation of another family time. It is possible that this could only be offered at short notice;
- Should family time be cancelled due to the team not having available staff, attempts will be made to offer a replacement family time within the same week. If there is no staff availability within the week, a replacement will not be offered unless it is evidenced to be in the child's best interest or not to replace it would be detrimental to the child's relationship with their family. (The majority of children, especially young children, would not be aware that a replacement family time too far ahead in the future was replacing a previous one missed).
- Good practice would suggest that the social worker should observe family time occasionally throughout the duration of proceedings this will assist with assessment and enables

knowledgeable information to be given in reports, statements and evidence in court. The social worker will be informed of any family time that cannot be covered by the team to enable this opportunity to be taken.

- The family time team should be informed if a parent cannot attend for any reason. Should a parent not attend family time on three consecutive occasions with no explanation then no further family time will take place until a discussion has taken place with the social worker and a family time planning meeting arranged to discuss nonattendance with parents/carers
- Should family time take place a number of times per week and the parent misses the same day consecutively (e.g. every Monday), on three occasions with no explanation, no further family time will take place on that day until a discussion has taken place with the social worker.

The family time team will hold the sessions for a further 7 days however if the parent has still not responded the family time may be considered available to offer to another family.

Planning for Children in Our Care (CIOC)

The family time team will support the transition to long term care plans and endeavour to ensure that this is smooth. Wherever possible the same Family Time Team Support Worker will remain in place, where this is not possible a smooth transfer to an alternative worker will be affected.

Ceasing Involvement with the Family Time Team

The family time team will not continue to supervise sessions once a long term plan has been agreed in court. The social worker's final Care Plan should make arrangements for long term family time arrangements outside of the family time team. The family time team will continue to facilitate sessions where possible to accommodate a plan to reduce family time gradually if this is the case.