

getting
it right
in the western isles



COMHAIRLE NAN EILEAN SIAR

Education & Children's Services

Family Contact Policy & Procedure Contract

Purpose: To explain the principles and process for supervised and supported contact between children and significant others

1. Context

When making contact arrangements as in all our work the welfare of the child must be the paramount consideration.

We have a duty to promote contact unless it is not consistent with, or is detrimental to the child's welfare.

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 contact with their family.

This continues to be the case throughout a child's time in care or where parents have separated.

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

2. Principles

- a) Contact is an integral part of care planning and must be considered at every stage of the process.
- b) Contact should be compatible with the child's needs taking into account their age, ethnicity, culture, religion and disability.
- c) Contact must always be individual and the emphasis should be on the qualitative nature of the contact as opposed to the duration.
- d) Children, young people and their family should be involved in all decisions relating to contact and their wishes and feelings taken into account.
- e) When a child is adopted, the Adoption Support Plan should adhere to the principle that links with the family or origin should not be completely severed and that the child's life-long need to know and understand their heritage is important.
- f) Contact includes every method of maintaining links with members of the birth family and other significant people for a child. It includes visits, overnight stays, telephone calls, letters, exchanges of information, photographs and indirect links through others.

3. Policy Statement about Contact

We will promote contact between children, their families of origin and others who have played an important part in their lives.

Contact arrangements will be made in order to protect the child's best interests and emotional well-being.

We will ensure a child feels emotionally secure in their current living arrangements and that the contact arrangements place the needs of the child first.

We will ensure all children in our care have a Contact Plan enabling them to have reasonable contact with family and other significant people in accordance with their assessed needs and best interests. Particular attention will be given to arrangements whereby a child may lose contact with specific aspects of their cultural heritage.

We will ensure that the Contact Plan is an integral part of the care planning process for children in care. The Care Plan will indicate the purpose of contact which will inform the specific arrangements about the nature and frequency of contact.

We will ensure that the Contact Plan and arrangements are compiled in consultation with the child, his/her parents and significant other family and friends.

We will ensure that the contact arrangements do not impede a child's right to "enjoy" mainstream childhood activities.

We will ensure that where it is necessary to safeguard or promote a child's welfare, contact will be supported or supervised. The decision and arrangements will be informed by the Assessment and analysis of risk to the child.

We will ensure that where contact visits are to be observed and recorded as part of an assessment, or where they are used therapeutically to directly influence parenting or family functioning, the adults (and the children, where appropriate) will be informed and this activity will be reflected in the Contact Plan.

We will ensure that Contact Plans and arrangements will be discussed and monitored at each statutory Review where relevant. Particular attention will be given to the Contact Plan whenever the Child's Plan is significantly changed or there is a sudden change of circumstances.

We will ensure that contact will only be refused for 7 days / on a short term basis upon the authorisation of a Service Manager who is satisfied that it is necessary to do so to safeguard or promote the child's welfare. The child will be given an explanation appropriate to their age and understanding.

We will only make a legal application to the Court or the Children's Hearing to prevent contact in the longer term upon the authorisation of a Service Manager who is satisfied it is necessary to do so to safeguard or promote the child's welfare. The child will be given an explanation appropriate to their age and understanding if and when an Order is granted by the Court or Children's Hearing.

We will make every effort to maintain some links for a child with his/her family of origin when contact visits are not appropriate. This may include exchange of letters or information through a third party. As a minimum standard, letterbox exchange with birth parents will be available for all children placed for adoption.

We will ensure that when parents or family members need help or access to resources in order to maintain contact with their child or children, we will assess how and what level of assistance can be provided.

We will ensure that a child's Contact Plan is always recorded, is up to date and provided in writing to all involved unless there is a verifiable reason not to do so.

4. The Nature of Contact

When making contact arrangements it is essential to differentiate between the types of contact.

Supported contact is where a neutral or Supportive environment is provided to enable parents/family and children to meet in as neutral a setting as possible. It should only be as restrictive as is necessary to ensure the child's well-being. Some parents may require advice, guidance and assistance during contact to improve their caring capacity with children.

Where there are concerns that a child may be at risk during the contact session it will be supervised. This may take the form of either discreet observation or more active participation of the supervisor and could involve the use of mirrored rooms or video equipment. The requirement for observation and recording and who will receive copies of the record should be agreed and written into the plan along with expectations of parental behaviour.

5. Planning Contact

It is important to distinguish between the planning of contact which relates to the overall care planning decisions for the child; and the management of contact which relates to the practical logistics and difficulties of each episode of contact.

The planning of contact relates to the care planning for a child in care and there should be assessment and analysis of

- Why is contact important for this child and family?
- What is the purpose of contact?
- Who should have contact with whom?
- Is there a need to support or supervise the contact?
- Duration and frequency of contact

The Contact Plan should be recorded in the Child's Plan where the child has such a plan. Where there is not a Child's Plan the Contact Plan should be recorded on the Children's Server.

Depending on the circumstances, it may also be recorded in the:

- Court Reports
- Adoption or Permanence Reports

The management of contact relates to the practical arrangements, implementation and monitoring of each episode of contact and will include:

- Making sure the detailed arrangements have been sorted out and are compatible with the purpose of contact
- Making sure contingency plans are in place to cover likely eventualities, and that emergency procedures are known for unforeseen events
- Setting up a system to record, and monitor each episode of contact and who will receive the information
- Agreeing how regularly the arrangement will be reviewed in addition to statutory Reviews and how and to whom significant information will be given in the event of a concern or difficulty arising
- Establishing the criteria for success- what will be regarded as satisfactory contact.

6. Contact Arrangements

The focus on the contact agreement must always be the needs of the child. Contact agreements should be drawn up using the agreed template which will include:

- Who will be involved
- Frequency and timing (Monday - Friday timed sessions)
- Venue and support
- Arrangements for supervision and recording sessions
- Any restraints, limits or expectations
- Tasks of who will do what before, during, after contact
- Contingency plans - anticipating problems or difficulties
- Arrangements for monitoring each episode
- Arrangements for monitoring the Contact Plan

7. Charging Policy

At this moment in time, the Comhairle does routinely assess parent's capacity to make a financial contribution towards the costs of contact for Orders made through the Court. It is likely a means-tested charging policy will be introduced in the future.

Terms of Agreement

Arrangements

- To avoid distress to the child/children, parents must telephone Children's Services if they are unable to attend contact
- If parents arrive later than 15 minutes after the contact start time and have not been in touch, the child/children will be returned to placement, where the child is looked after.
- If parents are unable to attend the arranged contact sessions on three occasions a meeting will be held to review the current arrangement.
- We are unable to transport parents unless agreed at the pre-contact meeting
- We do not provide contact sessions over weekends and bank holidays and cannot always reschedule if contact sessions are missed on these days

Contact Sessions

- Parents are encouraged to make full use of their time during contact and enjoy being with their children.
- Where no Compulsory Supervision Order is in place, parents are responsible for their children during the contact session.
- Workers will only intervene if they feel the situation demands or if agreed at the pre-contact meeting to e.g. support parenting skills
- Parents should be asked to help the child/children to tidy away equipment 10 minutes before the session is due to end. This helps the child realise that the contact session is coming to an end. Rooms must be left clean and tidy at the end of each session

Refreshments

- Hot and cold drinks are available
- Parents can bring "healthy snacks" for the children with the social worker's agreement

Recording of Contact Sessions

- All sessions are recorded in writing and a copy is sent to the Social Worker
- Parents can arrange with the Lead Professional to read recordings (One week's notice is required for this)
- Recordings cannot be copied or taken away by parents

Respect

- The use of offensive language, physical aggression or abuse towards children or any other adult is unacceptable and could result in contact being suspended
- All adults involved in contact are expected to respect each other

Mobile Phones

- So that the quality of contact is not interrupted, parents should switch off mobile phones

Behaviour Management

- Parents are not to smack or threaten to smack their children
- Staff will support and encourage parents to use alternative means of managing their children's behaviour

Smoking

- Smoking is not allowed within the building and cigarette breaks during contact are not permitted

Drugs and Alcohol

- Parents or family members might be asked to leave if they appear to be under the influence of either drugs or alcohol

Contact Supervisors

- Contact sessions will be as positive an experience as possible
- Contact Supervisors will provide appropriate play equipment
- Contact sessions will begin on time and parents will be informed of any delay
- There might be times when the allocated Contact Supervisor is not available. If a replacement is not available parents will be notified as soon as possible to re-schedule the contact session
- Observations will be written to give a fact based account of each session and feedback should be given to parents following the session
- Social Worker will receive written observation within 5 working days

Social Worker

- Social Worker will inform the Contact Supervisor of any required changes to the contact agreement.
- Supervise at least one contact session per month or as required.
- Will invite or ask for a report from Contact Supervisor to any meetings where contact is discussed.

Declaration

I understand the terms of this Contract Agreement and agree to its conditions.

Agreement signatories:

Parent/ other adult Date

Social Worker Date

Contact Supervisor Date