

POLICY ON THE SUPPORT AND SUPERVISION OF FOSTER CARERS



Introduction

This paper has been produced to outline to children, parents, foster carers and social workers Foster Care Link's policy on the support and supervision of foster carers.

Statutory framework

The National Minimum Standards for Fostering Services 2011 requires fostering services to have a clear strategy for working with and supporting carers (Standard 21).

The Standards require the fostering service to be a managed one, which provides supervision for carers and helps them to develop their skills.

Role of the Child's Social Worker

The child's social worker retains case accountability at all times for any child placed.

The child's social worker must carry out regular visits to the placement:

- When reasonably requested by the child or the carer
- From time to time as circumstances require
- In any event, within one week of the beginning of the placement and then at intervals of not more than six weeks during the first year of placement and subsequently at intervals of not more than three months

The child's social worker should provide the carer with relevant advice and support to enable the carer to manage the placement successfully.

They should also keep the carer informed as to the progress of plans and consult with the carer before there are any significant changes to agreed plans.

In summary, the child's social worker is responsible for supervising and supporting individual placements.

Role of the Supervising Social Worker

All approved carers will be supervised by a named, appropriately qualified social worker, known as the carer's supervising social worker.

The primary role of the supervising social worker is to ensure that the carer has access to adequate social work and other professional support, information and advice, to enable her or him to provide consistent, high quality care for a child or young person placed in her or his home.

How this is achieved will vary from carer to carer depending on their individual needs, but in all cases the supervising social worker will:

- Complete a Foster Carer Agreement with the carer

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- Ensure that the carer is informed in writing of, accepts, understands and operates within, all standards, policies and guidance agreed by the fostering service
- Ensure that the carer is supplied with up to date copies of the Foster Carer Handbook and Children's Guide
- Carry out an annual review of the carer's registration
- Identify, in partnership with the carer, training needs and identify how these will be met
- Ensure that the carer maintains an up to date training portfolio
- Ensure that carers produce and maintain safe caring guidelines for their household
- Ensure that any complaint by or against carers is investigated in accordance with the relevant procedure
- Ensure that lines of communication between the carer and the child's social worker are open and effective
- Maintain regular and effective communication with the child's social worker
- Provide the carer with assistance in dealing with other relevant services such as health and education
- Respond promptly to telephone calls and correspondence from the carer
- Visit the carer and otherwise maintain contact with the carer in accordance with the time frame outlined in this policy
- Ensure that the specific support needs of carers own children are monitored on a regular basis

While supervising social workers cannot and should not ignore the needs of children in placement, they do not have case accountability for them. This remains the responsibility of the child's social worker who should be the first port of call for carers requiring advice or support in respect of a specific child.

In summary, supervising social workers are responsible for supervising and supporting carers in respect of their general role as carers rather than in respect of specific placements.

Visits by Supervising Social Workers

Supervising social workers will meet with carers on a regular basis. Each meeting should have a clear purpose and provide an opportunity to supervise the carer's work as well as provide the carer with support.

In addition to the pattern of visiting outlined below, supervising social workers will always visit when reasonably requested by the carer.

Visits will take place at least as frequently as follows:

New carers (During the first year after approval)

1. When child is in placement, at least once every four weeks
2. When no child in placement, but the carer is available for use, at least once every three months with telephone contact at least every four weeks

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Carers approved for more than one year

1. When child is in placement, at least once every six weeks, with telephone contact at least every four weeks. In the case of long-term stable placements, gaps between visits can in exceptional circumstances be extended to a maximum 12 weeks, but with telephone contact every four to six weeks.
2. When no child in placement, but the carer is available for use, at least once every three months with telephone contact at least every four weeks

Unannounced visits

Supervising social workers will also make occasional unannounced visits, at least once each year.

The main purpose of the visit will be to look at the home environment that a child is living in. Foster Care Link recognises that our carers provide a high quality of care but we are constantly striving to ensure that children are safe in foster care and unannounced visits are one of the mechanisms available to ensure this.

Supervising social workers will ask to see the foster child's bedroom and communal areas available to the child such as the bathroom, kitchen and living rooms. They will not need to see the carer's bedroom or their children's unless they share with the foster child.

Supervising social workers will also need to check:

- Who is in the home
- Who is looking after the child
- If the carer is not at home, what arrangements have been made for the care of the foster child

If the carer is not at home, the supervising social worker will leave a note to say they have visited.

If the foster child is being looked after by someone other than the carer, the supervising social worker will seek to identify that person but will not continue with the visit.

All unannounced visits will take place between 8am and 8pm, with most visits taking place on weekdays.

Records of visits

Foster carer's files will include records of all supervisory visits.

Unannounced visits will be recorded on an Unannounced Visit Pro-forma.

Other visits will be recorded on a Supervisory Visit Pro-forma that includes:

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- Details of who was present
- Details of children currently in placement and issues arising from their placement
- Any changes to the carer's household
- Health and safety issues
- Review of training needs
- Details of any unauthorised absences of children from the household since the last visit
- Details of the use of sanctions or control since the last visit
- Details of any accidents to foster children since the last visit

Placement Agreements

Details of how often the social worker and supervising social worker will visit the placement will be recorded on the LAC Placement Plan Part 1.

The Placement Plan Part 1 will also record the details of the person carers should contact outside office hours for advice and support.

Out of Hours Support

Out of hours management and support services are available to all carers and details of how to access this support are provided in the Foster Carer Handbook. Supervising social workers will provide carers with the mobile telephone number of the supervising social worker and the registered manager.

Support Groups

Foster Care Link believes that support groups can make a valuable contribution to the range of support services available for carers.

All carers will be expected to attend a support group that will be organised and facilitated by individual supervising social workers.

Respite Care

Foster Care Link recognises that fostering, although often rewarding, can take a heavy toll on carers and other members of their household.

The need for respite care for carers is therefore accepted as a legitimate and necessary element of support for many carers.

The need for respite care will be discussed and agreed on a case by case basis, taking account of the needs of both the carer and the child.

Wherever possible, such needs will be discussed and agreed at the beginning of the placement and recorded in the child's care plan and the placement agreement.

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Where this is not possible arrangements for respite should normally be agreed within a statutory childcare review or placement agreement review meeting.

Foster Care Link would not usually expect to provide respite to permanent foster carers other than where the demands on the carer are such that this was agreed as necessary during the matching process.

Holidays

Carers will be expected to take children in placement with them when going on holiday. Any exceptions to this general rule should be negotiated with the placing authority as part of the placement agreement, as should payment to the carer for the cost of the holiday.

Foster Care Link believes that carers should be encouraged to take a regular break from fostering in order to retain enthusiasm for the task and to spend time with other members of the household, especially carer's own children.

Foster Care Link will pay an additional allowance to all carers equivalent to one week of the basic weekly allowance (reward rate) for each completed continuous six months of having children in placement. Full details of holiday payments can be found in Foster Care Link's allowances rates sheets for foster carers.

Foster Carer Support Group

Foster Care Link recognises the contribution that a thriving independent foster carer support group can play in the fostering service.

Foster Care Link will actively encourage the formation of such a support group by it's carers.

Supervising social workers will publicise the activities of the support group and encourage all carers to take an active part in their activities.

Administrative support will be provided for the work of the support group including copying and circulating information to carers.

Foster Care Link staff will attend meetings of the support group when reasonably requested to do so and Foster Care Link will consult with the support group on any proposed changes to the service.

Foster Care Link will also provide encouragement, advice and practical support to carers wishing to form self-help groups.

Fostertalk

Foster Care Link will ensure that all approved carers are registered as members of the Fostertalk and will pay the required membership fees.

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Training and Development

All carers will be expected to complete a core-training programme as outlined in Foster Care Link's current training strategy for carers.

Where there are two carers in a household, both will be expected to attend such mandatory training.

Carers will also be expected to undertake further training and development as identified in the carer's annual review of registration.

All carers will be expected to maintain an individual training profile.

Foster Care Link will ensure that mandatory training is accessible to all carers and endeavour to ensure that all other training and development activity is accessible to all carers.

Where necessary, Foster Care Link will provide practical support to enable carers to take up agreed training and development opportunities.

Foster Care Link will ensure that all carers are notified of available training and development opportunities on a regular basis.

Payments to Carers

Foster Care Link will ensure that carers are paid weekly allowances and other payments promptly in line with Foster Care Link's payment scheme for foster carers.

Allowances will be paid monthly in arrears.

Insurance

Foster Care Link expects all carers to notify their household and motor insurers of their approval as carers and make claims against these insurers in the first instance.

Where the carer's own insurers will not meet the claim or there is an unmet excess, Foster Care Link will support carers in seeking reimbursement from the placing authority for the costs of any claims arising from the carers carrying out their duties as a carer appropriately.

An allowance has been made in the weekly payment to carers for reimbursement of any increase in the costs of insurance premiums arising from their approval as foster carers or as a result of claims arising from the carers carrying out their duties as a carer appropriately.

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Foster Care Link will maintain a public liability and professional insurance policy for all staff and carers that covers costs arising as a result of child abuse claims against any staff or carer.

Reviews and Termination of Carers Approval

See Policy and Procedure on Reviews, Variation and Termination of Approval.

Complaints and Representations

Complaints and representations made by carers in their own right concerning the service received from Foster Care Link will be dealt with in accordance with Foster Care Link's Complaints Procedure for Foster Carers.

Complaints and representations will be recorded and monitored and the outcome evaluated to inform the future provision of services.

Complaints and representations on behalf of children will be investigated in accordance with Foster Care's Complaints and Representation Procedure or the complaints procedure of the placing authority depending on the nature of the complaint.

Carers will also be made fully aware of the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) if they wish to make representations to this as and when appropriate.

Allegations against Carers

Foster Care Link recognises its dual responsibility to children and carers to investigate complaints and allegations against carers thoroughly and speedily.

All such complaints will be dealt with in accordance with Foster Care Link's Procedure for Dealing with Complaints against Foster Carers. If abuse is alleged or suspected the relevant area child protection procedures may also run in tandem or alongside the complaints investigation.

Supervising social workers will ensure that carers are given access to appropriate support during such investigations and if necessary, Foster Care Link will consider commissioning independent support for the carer.

Management Systems

Foster Care Link will maintain management systems for carer supervision and support that:

- Ensure carers are reviewed in accordance with regulation
- Ensure visits to carers, in particular unannounced visits are carried out at the required frequency
- Ensure all carers are supported by a named, suitably qualified, social worker

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- Ensure complaints are monitored, with outcomes being used to inform future provision of services
- Ensure that records of allegations against carers are kept and monitored
- Ensure the fostering training strategy and programme reflects the needs of carers