**Corporate Parents Guide to Planning and Managing Contact**

*“I have TOO much contact with my mum. I’m never asked my opinion on it”*

*16 year old, Children in Care Council Member October 2016*

Contact was an area of concern picked up by the Children in Care Council when asked their opinions on priorities for the Aspirations Document. Several young people felt that it wasn’t working well for them, which the Corporate Parenting Group (CPG) heard first hand at a joint event. As a result, CPG instigated a Task Group of Managers and Practitioners covering all the key services supporting children in care, which also included an Ambassador and a Foster Carer who is a member of CPG. The views of children in care about their contact arrangements were collated and the views of Foster Carers were sought in order to inform these guiding principles.

**When considering contact ask the following questions -**

* What are the different wishes/views/expectations of children, birth family members, foster carers and or adopters? E.g. birth parents may believe contact is part of a plan for reunification and tell the child that they are coming home when this is not the case.
* Contact should be flexible to meet children’s changing needs over time and subject to thorough review, regularly and with the views and experiences of all parties considered.
* How will contact prevent the child from being torn between dividing loyalties? Ease the pain of separation and loss. Are Birth parents/family members able to support the placement and give emotional permission, or is there a risk they will undermine it?
* How will contact help the child settle into their new family by reassuring them that birth family members are ok and still care about them?
* How will contact help the child to understand why they are unable to live with their birth family or will the child be receiving conflicting messages about why they are in care?
* How will contact promote the child’s development by giving them a sense of identity and understanding of how they fit into the world? (such as for children placed outside of their birth family/adopted)
* How will contact enable them to continue relationships that have been positive and beneficial to them in the past? (such as for children in Long Term Foster care or sometimes in the case of adopted children ongoing contact with parents/siblings/grandparents/foster carers)
* How will contact enable them to develop relationships which will become more important to them as they grow older? (such as for children in long term foster care)
* Could contact re-traumatise a child by bringing them into proximity with someone who abused them or failed to protect them from harm in the past, and make the child question their new family’s ability to protect them? How will this be managed? Particularly within sibling relationships where sibling dynamics may be centred around trauma, abuse, neglect and scarce parental resources.
* How will contact reassure the child of their adopters’/long-term foster carers’ ability to protect them from harm, while enabling them to salvage positive aspects of former relationships?
* How will contact enable a child to develop an understanding of how people can hold many different types of relationships in their lives, knowing that some people are part of the everyday world and some are seen less frequently and perhaps only on specific occasions?

(Bond 2007)

**What children and young people told us about the frequency of contact**

Research in Practice (2015) and the recent survey of looked after children in Gloucestershire carried out by Julie Selwyn (2017) highlights how the frequency and consistency of contact is key to children and young people. It is interesting to note that looked after children and young people felt that their contact with their mother was either ‘mostly right’ (42% aged 8-11 and 45% aged 11-16) or ‘too little’ (40% aged 8-11 and 27% aged 11-16) These figures reduce in both age groups when considering contact with their fathers. Children and young people fed back that they found it hard when they (and their carers) did not have a clear idea of when contact was taking place.

***“I want to see them [mum and dad] 2 times a month once with both brothers and once on my own so I can have time to myself with mum and dad”***

***“I see [name] and [name] because I live with them but I don’t see my brother at all because he is in a Care Home. It will be a year at Easter”***

Within the survey of looked after children sibling contact was highlighted as very important to children, this was particularly within the age group of 11-16 years old, with 48% of young people feeling that they had too little contact. Foster carers and or adopters are often left to organise sibling contact between themselves where siblings are placed in more than one placement, the frequency of which can then become inconsistent. BAAF 2007 also note that Foster carers and Adopters received little support in facilitating and managing sibling contact, it suggests that this is due to the fact the professionals viewed it as ‘easier to manage’ and assumed that foster carers and or adopters could and would work together.

**Things to consider about the frequency of contact;**

**“Timing and frequency needs to depend on purpose of contact and child’s individual circumstances rather than on the placement type or legal order”**

* Who is important to the child within their birth family, with whom does the child have positive relationships and who do they understand to be part of their family?

**I would like to *“See my family more. I would like to see more of my Nan, Granddad, Mum, Aunty”* (Child aged 4-7yrs)**

* For a minority of children, a plan for no contact is the best plan. Low frequency contact can meet identity needs (one to four times per year) whilst high frequency contact is needed in order to maintain a positive relationship, but this still needs to be balanced with the child’s sense of belonging in their foster/adoptive or kinship family.
* Children like to know when and how they will be seeing members of their family; contact which combines siblings, birth parents and other extended family together can give little meaningful time to build/form individual relationships for children and can be experienced as overwhelming. Children and Young people fed back that sometimes they wanted better differentiated contact. (RiP 2015, Children in Care Survey 2017) Feedback from the Children and Young people aged 7-11, is that one of the best things about contact is seeing their siblings.
* Will the frequency of contact allow the child to regain emotional equilibrium, rest, play and recover between sessions? Contact which is too frequent disrupts routines and provides little time for a child to recover; high levels of contact in long term foster care (fortnightly or monthly) can be hard to manage (RiP 2015) Good quality contact which is less frequent and is well planned is better for maintaining positive relationships with birth family members (Bond 2007).
* CAFCASS guidance advises that contact is not a “*bargaining chip at the courtroom door in order to reach an agreement on a bigger issue in a case such as residence”.* When contact is agreed defensively and used to avoid contested hearings and to gain a specific order, the child’s needs are then lost.
* Feedback from foster carers (small survey of 20 respondents) show that foster carers value contact, but would like better communication with the child’s social worker when it comes to considering the impact on the child’s day to day life, the timing of contact and the frequency. Foster carers appear at times to get conflicting messages about contact requirements; this does link in with some of research comments which suggests that children and young people are often not told or asked about their contact plan and who they are seeing and when.

The Countywide Contact Team has a policy and procedures document, which also incorporates considerations regarding the frequency of contact, particularly with regards to the impact on placement and on children’s need to form a secure attachment to a primary carer (usually their foster carer)

**Useful reading/References**

Bond, H (2007) Managing Contact. BAAF (British Association for Adoption and Fostering)(*A very good, basic handbook for planning contact and supporting it)*

Countywide Contact Team Policy and Procedures – Tri X or request from the GCC Contact Team.

**RiP (2015) Contact: Making good decisions for children in public law. Research in Practice, Dartington.** *(I particularly recommend reading this before any recommendations for post Care and or Placement Order contact, as it contains a balancing argument for positive and negative contact outcomes, which reflects on factors relevant to Child, Birth parents, Siblings, Foster carers and adopters)*

Selwyn, L (2017) Your Life, Your Care: A survey of the views of looked after children and young people aged 4-18yrs in Gloucestershire. Bright Spot Survey.

Selwyn, L et al (2015) Beyond the Adoption Order, challenges, interventions and adoption disruption. BAAF.