Public law places a duty on us to provide contact with parents and any other relatives or persons connected with them to children in our care. We must also offer financial assistance to parents and others to facilitate this contact.

**We are all committed to maintaining links with birth family and significant others unless it can be demonstrated that it is not in the child’s best interest. We expect contact to be an integral and established part of social work practice with children in care.**

Contact is a key element in improving a child’s positive sense of self and identity. There are two key areas that enable and support this; the acknowledgement of children’s biological roots and heritage and the quality of attachment and caregiving. We must strive to improve outcomes for children in care by helping to form individual identity and by enhancing their ability to resolve identity issues. Positive contact is a key element in this work. We recognise the importance of attachments for children in order to develop and form their identity, as well as a positive sense of self, and how this impacts significantly on current and future relationships.

**Participation**

**Our legal responsibility is to ensure children and young people’s views and wishes are at the heart of any process that affects their lives, and we must seek active participation in our work with them.**

It is important that before any decision is made about the child/young person you should find out what their wishes and feelings are. These should then be considered, depending on the child/young person’s age and understanding, when developing contact plans. You need to gain a level of their understanding of the situation and their ability to cope with information at any given stage in the planning process. Engaging children effectively and helping them to participate often leads to a clear recognition of their difficulties, develops their strengths and promotes their resilience. You will need to consider the child’s wishes and feelings on the variety of contact options such as indirect and direct contact, as well as contact with different family members.

If a child or young person finds it difficult to express their wishes and feelings about any decisions being made about them to you, then they are entitled to have an advocate. For infants you will need to rely on your observations of the child prior to, during, and after contact and advocate on the child’s behalf.

**What is the purpose and impact of contact?**

That it meets the child’s needs in maintaining links with their family and significant others. Contact should be seen as primarily for the child.

Therefore, arrangements for children should focus on ensuring that the routines, familiarity, emotional and physical attentiveness given by the child’s primary carer are not unduly disturbed by contact arrangements. The focus for your involvement will not only be safeguarding, but also providing a secure base for attachment to be meaningful, in order to promote positive long term outcomes, and to promote the healthy development of a vulnerable child or young personseparated from parents and often their extended family. Contact can:

* Help to support and meet the psychological and emotional needs of children;
* Aid their wellbeing, self-esteem and identity;
* Provide them with information about their ethnic, cultural, genetic and medical heritage;
* Correct distorted perceptions of family relationships and separation;
* Provide children with the freedom to enjoy their relationships with family members;
* Be a key element of ongoing assessment of attachment and care planning;
* Inform, support and facilitate rehabilitation to the birth family;
* Maintain and develop sibling attachments when in separate placements.

Arrangements for contact reassure parents from the outset that they have a continuing role in their child’s life and to minimise distress of the child.

Contact can also reassure children about what is happening at home and to those individuals who are important to them. This is particularly the case where children have witnessed domestic abuse.

In such cases contact can serve to help children see what progress their parents and others are making against goals that have been set.

Contact must be based on a comprehensive and good quality assessment of the individual needs of the child. Where contact is directed by the count the Local Authority must make appropriate representation to the court to ensure it is in the best interest of the child. Consideration of contact is an essential element in the planning process, and clearly evidenced within the child’s care plan.

**Types of contact**

Contact is the term used to cover the formal arrangements by which a child in care is able to keep in touch with parents, other family members and significant others. This can be directed by the court or agreed at statutory Review meetings or Permanency Planning meetings. Direct contact means meetings between the child and another which includes face to face, phone calls, text and e mails. Indirect contact usually takes place via a third person and can encompass other means of keeping family bonds and connections alive and meaningful using photographs, letters etc.

**Assessment**

An assessment must determine the requirements of all contact provision to be delivered. For example: the nature of the contact; the level of supervision required; the frequency of contact. You must determine how and who should facilitate or supervise the contact. Where there is risk, consideration should be given to the individual circumstances, and the needs and abilities of the child to deal with the situation. Also think about the skills and experience of the facilitator or supervisor.

**Facilitated or supported contact**

Facilitated contact is less supervised and where it is deemed suitable and safe, should always be of the preferred way as it provides a more natural way for the child to have contact with their parents or their wider family network. Facilitated contact could take place in the parents’ home or the home of the foster carer or children’s home, but sometimes will be best in a neutral but comfortable/pleasant setting. Some contact could be hosted at a centre with other families present where this is deemed suitable, and where there is no significant risk to the child or others. Supported contact does not need to be carried about by people with the skills and experience in undertaking assessments and writing court reports. Can be a foster carer, can be members of the child’s extended family.

**Supervised contact**

Supervised contact may form part of the assessment that informs decision making during court proceedings. Decisions about the potential reunification of the child or young person with their family. The person supervising the contact will require assessment and court writing skills. It can be you, and should be you some of the time.

Outside the court arena supervised contact may be appropriate where there is a risk of harm (including emotional harm) or violence to the child. The supervisor will need the skills to identify these behaviours early on, and be able to diffuse the situation quickly to keep the child safe. On occasions, with very high risk cases, more than one supervisor will need to attend and support the contact session. You may need to attend to see for yourself and be able to provide evidence into the court hearings and/or he child’s statutory Review meetings. Contact should be continuously reviewed by the social worker to determine whether the same level of supervision and amount of contact is required. Facilitated contact should be offered as a ‘step down’ approach in the event that the case is no longer considered at high or medium risk. The movement between the supported or facilitated contact and supervised contact may need to remain flexible.

**Process and preparation for contact**

Contact arrangements must be considered as soon as the child or young person comes into care, or if a planned placement, prior to entering care. The initial care plan should summarise the contact arrangements providing clarity around frequency and the reason for the type of contact agreed. The Placement Planning meeting should include looking at whether financial or practical support for the parents around contact is required. The role of the foster carers (including connected persons) with supervising and transporting children in care for contact arrangements should be clearly defined and agreed before the contact starts.

When considering and planning contact the purpose of contact must be balanced with the impact on the child, (both practically and emotionally). For example: contact frequency; duration; venue; the distance they would need to travel to attend. You need to include a comprehensive risk assessment – who should not be attending, transport of children, safety to staff, risk of being followed, etc.

**Who**

You will lead on bringing together various assessments, views and desired outcomes as detailed in the care plan and placement plan to inform the contact plan.

With the help of your manager, you will need to be able to challenge court directions or family members when you judge it is appropriate to do so. The child’s wishes so far as is practicable, must be obtained and considered before a contact plan/contact is agreed.

Consideration should be given to both direct and indirect contact with parents, those with parental responsibility, nuclear and extended family members, friends and significant others. It is crucial that you are mindful of everybody’s feelings and what their expectations are regarding any contact, ensuring you are clear and as transparent as you can be about your plan.

This includes being clear on the expectation that Foster Carers provide support for contact sessions (not usually supervision) as well as transport for children to and from contact venues.

But some Foster Carers may refuse, so don’t assume they will do it. Ask for the support of the Foster Carer’s supervising social worker if you need to.

Where contact is to be supervised, establishing who the contact supervisor is and including them in early preparation of the plan is essential. This should include where possible securing the services of the same contact supervisor for every session. It can be you, and should be you some of the time. Drawing up a contact agreement, or chairing a contract agreement meeting is often a good idea.

**Where**

The planning of the venue for the contact must consider the child’s needs first and foremost.

Factors that will influence the venue are: is the contact is supervised; the age and development of the child; the needs of the child and family members (e.g. accessing the venue). Contact can occur in a range of locations, but the location must be considered in any risk assessment

Undertaken, including any restrictions in contact. Securing appropriate venues and transport is crucial for the success of the contact plan.

**How**

There is a specific requirement within the care plan to set out the arrangements for contact in writing. Your contact plan must be authorised by your line manager, and copies given to all those involved in participating in contact. The plan must be contained within the Placement Plan and Care Plan before the start of contact. You must include any contingency plans, specify those who are prevented from having contact, and clearly detail any risks or specifics to ensure that contact is safe and promotes the welfare of the child.

**The contact plan must also be endorsed by the child in care review process and by the child’s Independent Reviewing Officer.**

Where contact is supervised efforts you must try to make sure the same contact supervisor is used throughout. Where this is not possible the contact plan must be shared and discussed with each contact supervisor, and you must give an update on progress/issues.

**Before new contact arrangements start the child and those participating in contact should be prepared and informed of the contact plan and your expectations in order that they are clear what to expect.**

**Recording**

All contact whether supervised or facilitated/ supported should be recorded, monitored and reviewed. Contact is an important part of the care plan and must be considered at each statutory Review.

Records should include difficulties identified and arrangements to overcome them. It is equally as important to record and analyse strengths seen within the contact sessions as it is to record the difficulties or concerns.

The recording of supervised contact must be consistent and provide details of the contact and any observations, and an analysis of the contact experience for the child, and impact on the child.

Recordings may be required to be submitted as evidence as part of the court process, and therefore it is important that records are completed within 24 hours of the contact taking place.

A record of each session must be included on Liberi as part of the child’s file. This information may be shared with parents, and they should be encouraged to add their comments. Copies of the records of supervised contact should be made available to Legal Services when this is requested.

**De-brief**

Your direct work with the child may include a de-briefing session after contact, and it may be a good idea to discuss contact with the other participants to gain their account t of the experience and their reactions to contact.

**Stopping contact**

You have a responsibility to promote positive contact for your children in care, but also to take steps where restrictions on contact are required.

In Public law the Local Authority has the power to decide what amounts to ‘reasonable’ contact, ensuring that at all times our paramount duty is to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child.

Suspension or the termination of contact may be necessary because of inappropriate behaviours by adult participants, or when the child requests it if they are old enough, and if there is obvious distress as a result of contact.

**Sibling contact**

We must accommodate a child together with siblings so far as is ‘reasonably practical and consistent with his/her welfare’. You are encouraged to keep siblings together whenever it has been assessed as appropriate.

Assessing siblings to decide on placing together or separating for permanency is complex, and research does not always provide consistent messages and evidence that placing siblings together improves their long term outcomes. Sibling contact and assessment should be approached through a life span perspective because the decisions that are made for them now may affect their future relationships.

Relationships between siblings can have both a positive and negative effect on their placements.

After birth mothers, siblings are the next largest group of relatives putting their names on the Adoption Contact Register. Their motivation for searching includes a sense of loss and grief, a notion of the sibling as being a part of themselves, and just wanting to know if their sibling is all right.

Decisions should be based on a comprehensive assessment of the quality of children’s relationships and their individual needs and how these can be met together. If you cannot place siblings together ask each of them what their relationships with their brother and sisters mean for them and facilitate as best as you can the contact they want. Ensure that you revisit this with all children and young people and that you understand the emotional impact contact may be having on them.

Contact should be about maintaining and building meaningful connections with each other and a sense of identity. It is much more than just seeing each other. Siblings can include brothers and sisters who are not in care, and ‘sibling-like’ relationships that develop in care or at home.

**Geoff Gurney**

**Interim Assistant Director for Corporate Parenting, September 2015**

**Email me if you found this procedure in a nutshell helpful.**