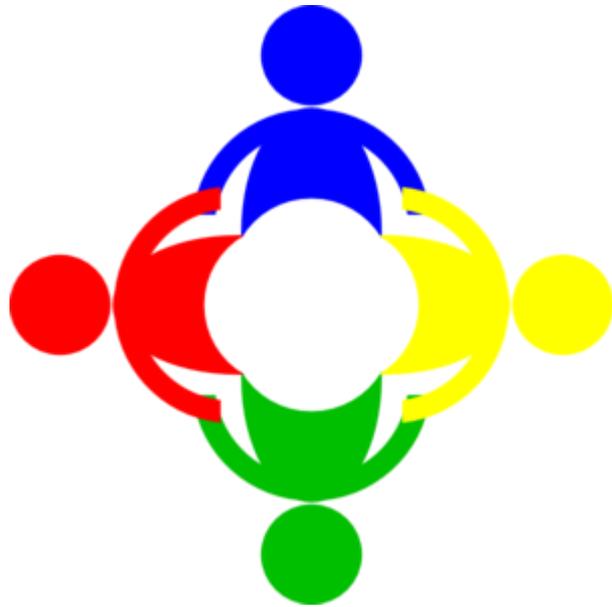




worcestershire
county council



Supervised Family Contact Practice Guidelines

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Supervised Contact Practice Guidance

After consultation with children and young people within Worcestershire the term 'Family Contact' is now referred to as 'Family Time' when speaking to children and young people. Both terms will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.

1. Introduction

The arrangements for supervised contact should be delivered in line with Permanency planning for children within Worcestershire. All key stakeholders must work together to achieve the best outcomes for children. A culture and practice shift is required to begin thinking and planning family time within permanency planning from the outset. Arrangements for ensuring quality family time are integral to good permanency planning.

2. Background/Context

2.1. The legal framework

The European Convention on Human Rights Article 8 provides a right to respect for private and family life, and this creates both positive and negative obligations on the State. The State has a positive obligation to promote family life and a negative obligation to refrain from interfering with it. But Article 8 is also a qualified right.

The Children Act 1989 requires courts making decisions about children, to treat the child's welfare as their paramount consideration, so considerations about a child's needs could in some instances override Article 8.

Problems arise when trying to balance these two principles.

2.2. The requirement to provide contact

Justice Munby's decision in *Re M.* [2003] established what has been known as the 'baby contact regime'. This has resulted in an expectation that local authorities will ensure that separated babies involved in care proceedings will have regular and frequent contact, perhaps daily, with their parents.

Local Authorities have a duty to promote reasonable contact between a looked after child or young person and their parents, others with parental responsibility, relatives and friends unless this is not reasonably practical or consistent with their welfare. This applies whether or not the child is looked after by voluntary agreement (S.20) or by statutory order (S.31).

2.3. Providing an appropriate level of contact

Munby qualified this in the Family Justice Council Debate (2010) to say that in the context of care proceedings, where this was being used to explain or justify levels of contact, professionals often could not provide a rationale based on research or evidence for the level of contact other than 'professional opinion'.

Munby stated that judges had to work on the basis of evidence, and as parents want contact most days of the week and for lengthy periods. 'Contact two or three times a week for a couple of hours is simply not enough, if the parents want more.' Munby later qualified this view in light of recent research. [\(See Ref 1 point 3\)](#)

2.4. Core Contact Levels

- 0-6 months: 3 contacts a week every alternative day (e.g. Mon-Wed-Fri) with no contact at the weekend **or** for 2 consecutive days (Sunday-Monday) up to 15 hours
- 6 months – 2 years: up to 3 x 2 hours weekly
- 2 years+: up to 2 x 1.5 hours weekly

[\(Ref 1\)](#)

Contact levels can be increased with Group Manager (Specialist Support Service) consent **if** reunification is the plan, and the child's routine is established and this is the recommendation of the revised assessment endorsed by the case holding Team Manager.

The evidence-base as set out in Part 3: Practice Guidance MUST be read and taken into account when deciding on the frequency of contact. The above can only be a guide to the maximum amount of contact to be agreed. Less frequent contact may be appropriate in some cases.

2.5. Key factors regarding contact arrangements

The Family Justice Council Debate (2010) identified the following key factors as needing to be taken into consideration when considering levels (frequency and length of time) of contact between parents and their children:

- Adults, who are or may become long term and permanent carers for a child, need to remain as familiar figures for the child.
- For a young child familiarity means that contact has to be moderately frequent.
- Contact must meet a child's basic needs: safe care, warmth, shelter and food.
- Stress must be minimised: what is stressful to young babies is strangeness, unfamiliarity and disruption of their routine.
- Contact must follow the baby's rhythm and timetable and not impose too many external constraints at an early age.
- If a child or a young baby has a need to sleep and has to be woken in the middle of a sleep that tends to be stressful for the child.

- Feeding or not feeding a baby before a contact to suit the contact arrangements will cause unnecessary stress and may lead to a stressful interaction with parents.
- Long car journeys and a succession of unfamiliar escorts and supervisors can cause undue stress.
- Contact settings must be suitable.

3. The Family Contact Service (FCS)

FCS Vision

The Family Contact Service aims to be a Centre of excellence where respected professionals provide the highest quality service in an efficient and child-centered manner to which other agencies can aspire.

3.1. FCS Principles

The principals of Worcestershire's Permanency Planning Framework must underpin arrangements for supervised contact. The key principal is that the best interests of the child must be at the center of all planning and decision-making.

Contact with family members and significant others must be agreed when the child/young person becomes looked after and arrangements to review the contact considered. The Contact arrangements must be regularly reviewed to reflect the journey to permanence considering contact will serve a different purpose over time.

The FCS will endeavor to:

- Maintain consistency of contact worker where possible notwithstanding staff absences.
- Supervise contact at the venue nearest to the child's residence. (Unless there is a clearly identified risk that means contact needs to be at a staffed centre)
(Ref 1 point 2)
- Reschedule contacts where they are missed for reasonable reasons.
- Achieve effective two-way communication with referrers.

3.2. FCS Standards

The FCS will adhere to the following standards:

- Service requests will be considered and where accepted the first contact will be in place within 5 working days
- Members of the team will be available to discuss and respond to referrals
- The safety of children will be paramount in all undertakings
- All contact sessions will be recorded and uploaded on Framework I
- All service users will be treated with courtesy and in a non-discriminatory manner at all times.

- Confidentiality will be strictly adhered to in accordance with departmental guidelines.
- All complaints will be dealt with promptly in accordance with the complaints procedures.

4. Criteria and Core Offer

The FCS will provide a contact service to children and young people who are looked after by the local authority to inform their permanency plan or until this is agreed. Priority will be given to cases subject to court proceedings and where there is a requirement to provide evidence to inform proceedings. This applies where there is an assessed and identified risk which means contact has to be supervised and the children are aged under 14

Consideration will also be given to older children with diagnosed disabilities/learning disabilities who are subject to court proceedings and where there is an assessed identified risk.

Any exceptions to this core offer will depend on capacity and be for a short time limited period.

4.1. FCS responsibilities

- **The FCS will provide supervised and/or supported contact with children and families in a designated contact center or in the community with approval from the referrer and a clear identified purpose. The Family contact service supervises contact for families subject to court proceedings. The purpose of supervising the contact is because there is an identified and assessed risk. The contact worker is responsible for providing close observation and vigilance, listening to all conversations to ensure good quality recordings, which contribute to assessments regarding permanency plans for children and young people.**
- **Where contact is required to be in the community this must be risk assessed and have a clearly identified purpose.**
- **Where activity days out are authorized close monitoring is not possible and as such would be more appropriate to be facilitated by the foster carer.**
- Supervised contact can be between the child's parents, siblings and significant other family members. Also, any other adult who is being assessed as the child's permanent carer (e.g. grandparents and other family members).
- The Family Contact service (FCS) will liaise with parents and carers to arrange dates and times of contact and inform the referrer of agreed arrangements.
- Parents will be provided with Supervised Contact information/Agreement.
- The expectation is that carers will transport children to and from contact but the FCS will work in partnership with the Fostering Services and carers to facilitate this process. The FCS will endeavor to supervise contact at *an appropriate venue* as close as possible to the child's placement to avoid undue traveling and to minimize transport costs. Where the carer has two or more unrelated placements the FCS will arrange the children's contacts at a similar time to reduce the carers transporting

episodes. On occasions when carers are unable to transport children to contact due to appointments, training etc. the FCS will support with transport where possible.

- The level of contact will be provided according to guidance stated by the Legal and Statutory Framework J9. However, this may vary according to the specific needs of the child, risk, to support reunification plans or other circumstances (Appendix 2 Core Contact Levels).
- The FCW will provide a record of every contact.
- The FCW will provide representation at LAC reviews where the level and content of contact should be reviewed according to current circumstances. Where this is not possible, a report will be provided. At each review consideration should be given to the full range of options for contact based on risk.
- A review can also take place with referrer and Family Contact Worker at key change points throughout the process. **(Ref 2)**
- With 2 weeks prior notification of court hearings from the referrer the FCS will reschedule contacts missed due to court hearings. In the case where contacts are rescheduled times and dates, will be determined by the FCS according to availability. This may also include weekends. Without prior notification missed contacts will become the responsibility of the allocated social worker
- Contact will be supervised whilst families are subject to proceedings and whilst assessments are taking place. Contact will conclude or be reduced according to the outcome of the final court hearing. At this stage consideration must be given to the full range of options for contact.
- The FCS will contribute to reunification planning and implementation.

4.2. Additional FCS support

Within the context of providing Family Contact the FCS can also provide where required:

- Contribution to Life Story work.
- Specific intervention with families e.g. guidance regarding appropriate parenting.
- Monitor and record according to specific items identified by the social worker.
- Provide recordings or reports with bespoke items as specified by the social worker.

4.3. What the FCS does not provide

- A service without a referral and full risk assessment
- Contact between brothers and sisters
- Copies of recordings to other parties
- Transport for adult attendees to contact
- Social Activities
- Supervised contact solely for grandparents and other family members who are not subject to assessment

- Supervised contact for children in residential units. It is expected that it will be provided by residential staff and key workers
- Supervised contact for children placed with parents or in a kinship arrangement. (Team managers in exceptional circumstances can negotiate this where there is significant risk, and an agreed timescale for service delivery with a plan for transition)
- Supervised contact in cases where the child is adopted
- Supervised contact on Christmas eve / Christmas day and Bank Holidays
- Additional contacts when children or parents go on holiday
- A child minding service

5. Contact worker's responsibilities

Family Contact Workers will support parents to engage with their children and adhere to the agreed requirements of the referral and risk assessment.

Family Contact Workers will:

- Be fully prepared for contact.
- Book venue and assess room for suitability.
- Ensure rooms are equipped, clean and child friendly (access keys for venue).
- Discuss Working Agreement with parents/carers prior to contact
- Provide supported contact where required and ensure this is properly recorded
- Monitor and record parent's adherence with working agreements
- Upload accurate, relevant and evidenced recordings of contacts on Framework I within 5 working days.
- Alert social worker to risk or concerning issues related to contact.
- Provide Foster Carers with relevant feedback regarding contact by telephone, face to face or via the contact notebook.
- Attend Looked After Children Reviews or provide a report.
- Provide support for the undertaking of assessments.

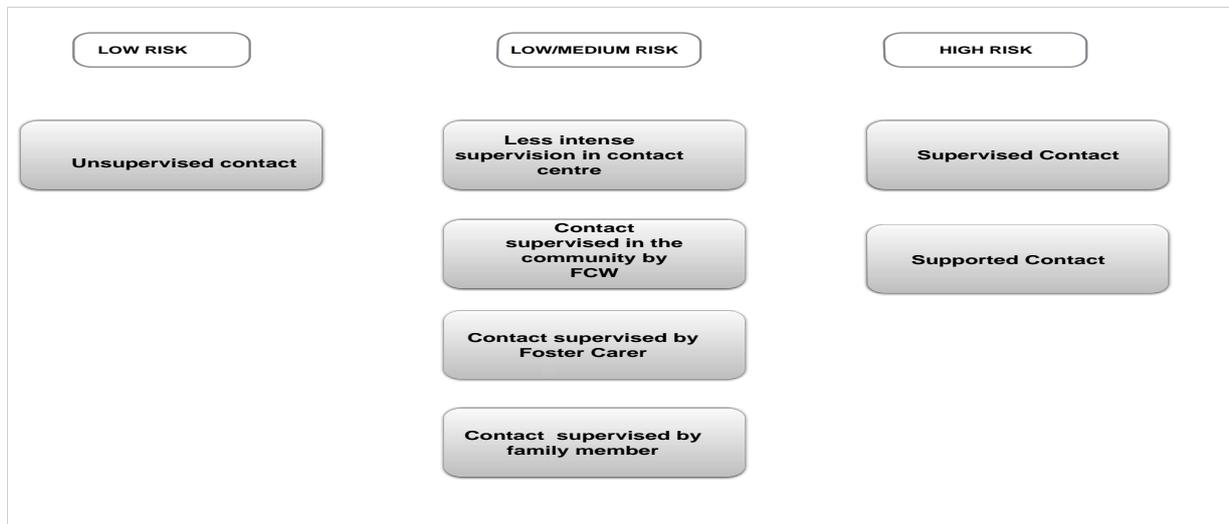
6. Responsibilities of the foster carer

The expectation is that Foster carers will support contact by transporting children. Where the carer has two or more unrelated placements the FCS will arrange the children's contacts at a similar time to reduce the carers transporting episodes. On occasions when carers are unable to transport children to contact due to appointments, training etc. the FCS will support with transport where possible.

(Ref 3)

7. Referrer's responsibilities

This paper relates to supervised contact as provided by the FCS. Of course not all contact requires supervision and referrers should consider the full range of options when planning arrangements for quality Family Time. (See 'Transitions' below)



- Select an appropriate form of contact

Referrers must give consideration to the full range of contact options prior to making a referral. Does contact require supervision and, if so, which of the following is most suitable:

- Indirect supervised contact within a Contact Centre without the constant presence of a contact worker in the room.
- Supervision by a family member.
- Supervision by a foster carer in the Contact Centre, in the community or in the foster carer's home.
- Contact supervised by a Family Contact Worker.
- Supported contact where contact worker provides advice/guidance and intervenes to protect children and ensure appropriate parenting.

7.1. The Referral Process

- Notify the FCS of a potential referral at the earliest opportunity via telephone call/email to FCS Team Manager prior to court hearing
- Complete a **request for service** form on FWI that clearly states the purpose of supervised contact, outcomes to be achieved and any specific aspects to be monitored or observed during contact. If, for example, the aim is to undertake an assessment, specify what is required from the Contact Worker in contribution to the assessment.
- Invite contact worker to placement meetings and Looked After Children Reviews.
- Be clear regarding any restrictions to the contact and which specific family members are allowed to attend.
- Be clear with parents regarding the need for supervised contact.
- Be clear with the FCS regarding any additional needs relation to the family.
- Tell us if parents or carers are unavailable on particular days or at specific times.
- Provide accurate addresses and contact numbers for families and carers.

- **Provide a full *risk assessment* with the referral prior to a service being provided. Risk Assessments must be up to date within 3 months, include consideration of any significant changes and clearly state any risks to the child, parent, foster carer or contact worker. It should identify any potential risky scenarios and explain how they should be addressed. (New Risk Assessment form Appendix 1)**
- Confirm with carers at the earliest opportunity their responsibilities to transport /Gain carer's commitment to providing support with transporting children to and from contact. The expectation is that carers will transport children to and from contact but the FCS will work in partnership with the Fostering Services and carers to facilitate this process. Where the carer has two or more unrelated placements the FCS will arrange the children's contacts at a similar time to reduce the carers transporting episodes. On occasions when carers are unable to transport children to contact due to appointments, training etc. the FCS will support with transport where possible.
- Tell us the required level of contact without stipulating specific days and times of contact or agree them with parents/carers or contact workers without first agreeing with the FCS as pre-agreed times might not be available
- Social workers should inform parents how their contact will be assessed

7.2. Throughout Supervised Contact

- Alert the FCS to any relevant information pertaining to contact or changes in levels of risk and update risk assessment accordingly.
- Inform the FCS about family/Foster carer plans re: holidays, court dates, hospital visits or any other reasons for cancellation of contact.
- Request input from the Contact Worker when reviewing contact.
- Inform the FCS if you are attending contact. Also if Guardian, Health visitor or other professionals will be attending.
- Tell us if you are undertaking assessments and agree contribution of FCW.
- Tell us of change of placement or any other significant changes.
- Liaise with the named BSO or team manager to request changes to contact.
- Inform parents if the decision is taken to cancel reduce or suspend contact.
- Provide parents with any financial and other support to attend contact if required.
- Tell us when a case transfers to a new worker.
- Inform FCS of any respite placements
- Inform FCS of dates of LAC reviews.
- Prepare working agreements where appropriate and gain sign up of parents.
- The level of contact will reduce once a final outcome is reached and the child/children's placement is determined. A contact reduction plan must be considered at the point of referral and referrers must inform parents and carers from the outset that contact levels will be reduced to 3 times a year after the court proceedings are concluded.
- Inform FCS of potential long-term plan.
- Tell us of plans for reunification and how you would like the service to contribute.

Review

- The Family Contact Worker should be invited to LAC reviews
- The Contact arrangements should be scrutinised as part of the child's permanency plan with a clear exit or transition plan

Missed Contacts

In the case of contacts missed due to court hearings. The FCS must be given 2 weeks prior notification of court hearings if contacts are to be rescheduled. Without prior notification missed contacts will need to be made up by the referrer.

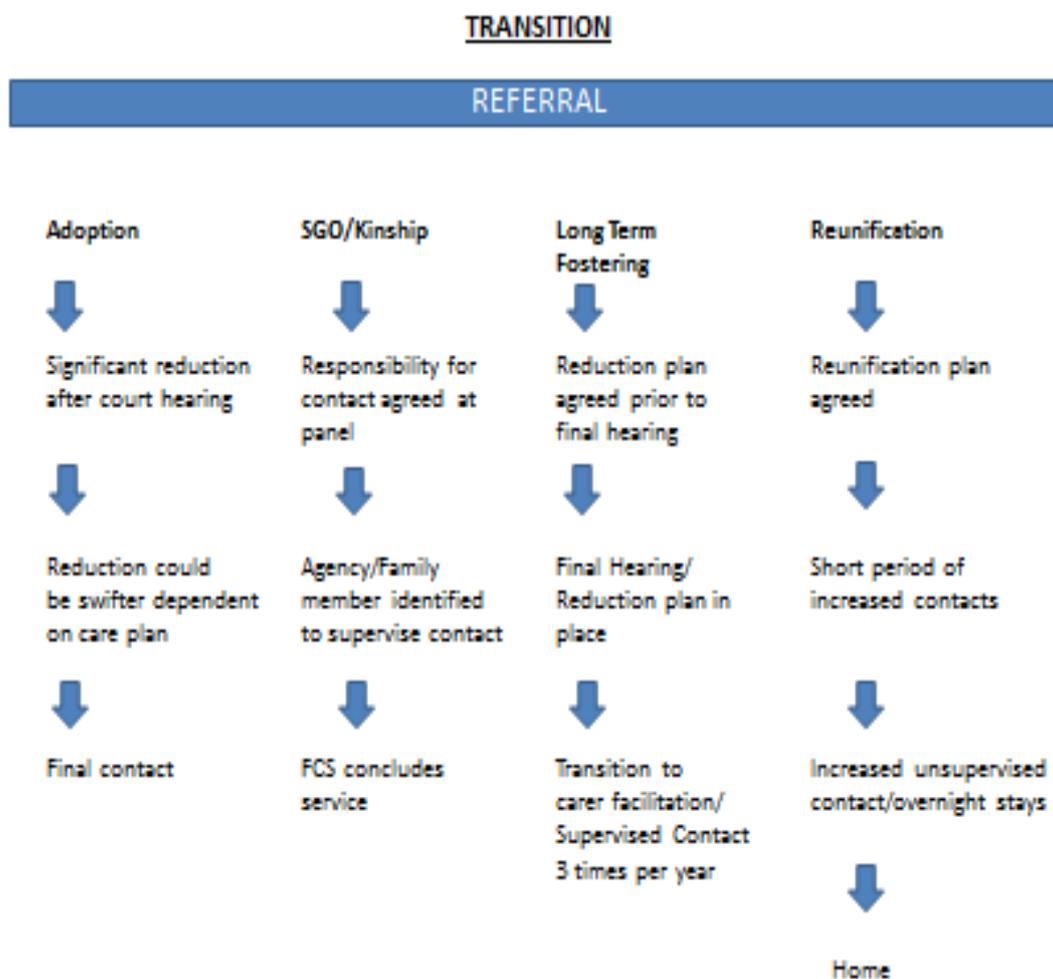
Where parents do not attend contact 3 times in succession a working agreement will be put in place requiring them to phone in to confirm attendance prior to contact taking place. If parents do not call in to confirm attendance contact will not take place. Continual missed appointments for contact will result in the scheduled time being reallocated. Parents will then be required to call the service and arrange a time when contact can take place for each contact. Missed contacts will be recorded stipulating the reasons. The referring social worker will be consulted and attendance records will be included in case recordings presented at court.

(Ref 2)

8. Preparing for transition

There are various outcomes that are possible from the initial request for supervised contact, reunification, Permanency, Kinship arrangements and Adoption. The FCS is committed to working in partnership with social workers to support the transition to appropriate outcomes for children.

8.1. Transition Diagram



8.2. Adoption

Prior to the Final Hearing, the Contact arrangements will be considered and incorporated into the Final Care Plan and endorsed at a LAC Review. The Review will also consider transition arrangements, where Contact is reducing and a clear plan agreed to include any final Contact arrangements.

(Ref 4)

8.3. Long term fostering

Where the Permanency Plan is long term fostering, it is expected that Contact arrangements will replicate family life as far as possible. This requires the foster carer(s) to transport and facilitate Contact.

The FCS will support transition arrangements when the final Care Plan is agreed. This will enable a smooth transition to Foster Carers supervising Contact, where supervised Contact is required and where the Permanency plan is long term fostering.

The ongoing Contact arrangements will be considered at the LAC Review.
Training will be provided to Carers, where required.

8.4. Reunification

Provide practical support for reunification

Increase or vary Contact where appropriate to support reunification plans

9. Bank holidays/Christmas and other public holidays

Where families have more than one contact in a week and one of their contacts fall on a public holiday. This missed contact will not be provided.

Where the missed contact falls on a public holiday and is the only contact for that week an alternative date will be arranged which may include a weekend.

10. Training

All Family Contact Workers are trained in Diploma in Children and Young People's Workforce. A number of contact workers are newly qualified social workers. All are trained in First Aid including pediatric first aid.

11. For all enquiries regarding supervised contact please Contact:-

Name: Carol Stewart Change Manager

Tel: 01527 579824 Email: cstewart@worcestershire.gov.uk

Name: Sharon Kilner Business Support Officer

Tel: 01527 579824 Email: skilner@worcestershire.gov.uk

12. References

Ref 1 Contact levels

1."When infants are in care, especially where this is parental violence and abuse, they need time to settle, attune to their caregiver and establish a predictable and safe routine. There

are particular concerns for infants who move rapidly into high-frequency contact before they have had time to settle and get to know their carer. Particularly for infants at the age of 5-8 months or those coming directly from the hospital to carer, when high levels of contact that involve the infant leaving their secure base and separation from a primary figure, can create anxiety and distress. Although infants between six months and 3 years may show the strongest signs of separation anxiety, measuring the stress hormone cortisol shows that younger infants are also stressed by separation from their carer."

2. *The Kenrick (2009)* study found that significant levels of infant distress were reported where high frequency contact took place and disruption to routines, extensive commuting and leaving their foster carer at significant points in their development all contributed to long lasting adverse effects. Where parental relationships are highly conflicted, particularly where one parent holds safety concerns for their child, high levels of parental contact are detrimental to children." (*J. Kenrick 2009*)

3. *Munby*

Munby said that he found the new research on the impact of contact that was presented by Jenny Kenrick and Danya Glaser and others as compelling and that there is now evidence that should support a change in application of principles in relation to contact. He feels that this research should have a direct impact on how contact plans are going to be argued in court in future. (*Corum 2010*)

Ref 2 Review

The Contact plan and working agreement should be reviewed regularly to ensure it continues to meet the changing needs of the child. Parents' engagement with contact needs to be kept under constant review. Not turning up for contact or regularly turning up late provides evidence about a parent's commitment.

(*Worcestershire Social Care Legal Services November 2012*)

Ref 3 Travel

2 Distance is also an issue for children, as travel can result in fatigue and irritability, which may interfere with the quality of a contact visit (Triseliotis, 2010). Distance can be problematic for carers, if they are providing transport to contact venues, it is not necessarily quality time spent with younger children, and may disrupt the home routine if contact is of a high frequency (*Humphreys & Kiraly, 2011; Kenrick, 2010*).

Ref 4 Transition (adoption)

Martin Narey reported on contact arrangement for children in care in particular those for whom the plans were that they would be being placed or adoption. In particular he focused on timescales and the reduction of contact when a placement order is granted.

(*Martin Narey Adoption Advisor to the government July 2012*)