

**Department for Children, Adults and Health**

Staying Over Care Policy for Foster Carers

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**Author: Kathy O’Mahony, Fostering Task Force**

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**Introduction**

In South Gloucestershire, we recognise the important and sometimes challenging role Foster Carers play in caring for children and young people who are in care. Whilst they are hugely rewarding to care for, many of these children will have experienced trauma, and all have experienced separation and loss. This can bring a range of sometimes significant difficulties for them, which they will deal with in different ways, sometimes leading to behaviour and challenge that can push family life to the limits. This staying over care policy is written with permanence in mind. In order to maintain their family life, some foster carers and some children may need a short break from each other. Staying over care is based on what the child and the carer are assessed to need to achieve permanence and promote the best outcomes for the children or young people in foster care.

Many foster carers have their own children who may also benefit enormously from being part of a fostering family – but this too can bring challenges. To quote one child of foster carers:

*‘Make sure your children understand and are ready to foster. It is very difficult for them to share their lives and they need a lot of reassurance. Also make sure you have time to spend with your children so they know they can come to you with any problems and you are never too busy.’*

Not all carers will feel the need to take breaks from caring for foster children, but some will, and for some it can make the difference between feeling able to continue to offer a child a place in their home and not. Ensuring children have continuity in their foster home is of paramount consideration together with meeting the needs of the child/young person concerned. In South Gloucestershire, planned staying over care for children and young people and breaks for carers should be considered with the needs of the child and the continuity of care in a stable foster home as paramount.

Young people in South Gloucestershire have expressed some negative views about the way staying over care is managed and talked about, and so there needs to be more sensitivity and understanding about their needs when their carers need some time to re energise. Our vision across the fostering service is that everyone takes the stance ‘would this be good enough for my child?’ and this must be asked when arrangements are being made.

Some carers know their staying over care needs in advance – for example when the family agree to foster, parents can assure their children there will be some undivided attention away from home on a break together to re-charge. Others can reach a stage where they recognise for the best interests of all, that some time away from foster children and at times their birth children is needed. It is important foster carers don’t feel guilty/bad about this. Equally it is important that the foster children aren’t made to feel abandoned or unwanted, and that arrangements can be of positive benefit to them too. A balance needs to be struck to meet the needs of all, but with careful thought and sympathetic management, breaks can be facilitated that benefit everybody – that is what we in South Gloucestershire are aiming for.

**Staying Over Care for children looked after in Foster Placement**

National Minimum Standards set out the following:

*‘Foster carers are provided with breaks from caring as appropriate. These are planned to take account of the needs of any children placed.’*

In South Gloucestershire, we do recognise that at times foster carers may need some time to renew their strength and energy as any parent may do. Within the foster carer agreement it also states ‘care for the child/young person should be no less favourable than for other members of the family’.

Ideally, agreement should be reached when the child first goes to live with new carers as to the level of staying over care required by a child or by the carers. The level of staying over care, and as far as possible how this should be provided and how it meets the needs of the child and helps to ensure there are no unplanned breaks in the care offered and the child can stay as long as the plan states, should be written into the child's care plan where this is a regular arrangement.

Where staying over care is identified as a need after the child has gone to live in their new home, it must be clearly documented as quickly as possible through formal review of the child’s care plan. Where possible any request for a carer’s break should be requested 3 months prior to the break period through the carers supervising social worker. This allows time for the break to be agreed by the child’s social worker and their line management, ability to plan with the carers the appropriate staying over care provision for the child or young person, and prepare them for the staying over care. Carers should not arrange staying over care within their network without informing their supervising social worker.

It is accepted that there may also be occasions when carers may require a break due to an unforeseen emergency situation such as going into hospital, family bereavement or illness.

Planned staying over care should be documented as ‘planned or programmed short term breaks’.

In South Gloucestershire we believe that arranging staying over care breaks should as far as possible be managed as it would within an every-day family environment, as a positive option with positive outcomes for the child. It is not acceptable for a child to feel that they are having time away from the family because of their behaviour or that the carer does not want to be with them. Children need to feel that staying over care is a positive experience and one which also happens in ordinary families. We therefore strongly encourage foster carers to develop their support network to enable fostered children & young people to have the best possible experience. This might mean having family members or friends assessed and checked so they can provide care to the young person when needed; as many other children would do.

If a family member or member of the foster carers support network can look after the child/young person on a staying over care basis, the supervising social worker will be responsible for making sure safeguards are in place. As a minimum the supervising social worker would:

* Undertake DBS checks on the proposed staying over care fostering household
* Undertake a health and safety check of the property
* Visit the family to check the arrangements, and ensuring the family member understands the needs of the child and can meet the practical needs, - the school run, medical needs etc
* Will ensure the staying over carers have an understanding of safe care
* Will ensure the staying over carers have an understanding of what the child’s views and wishes are
* Supervising social worker or the child’s social worker may also undertake an unannounced visit during the time of the staying over care – Team managers & SWs to agree who should do it and at what point this should be taken when the arrangements are made
* Liaise with the child’s social worker to inform them of the staying over care arrangements and to seek agreement from child’s parents to place the child temporarily with the alternative carers if the child is on a Section 20 agreement

If a family member is to act as a regular staying over carer for a primary carer who is looking after a child for the long term, best practice would be for the staying over carer to be formally assessed and approved as a connected staying over carer. This would mean that all training, payments, scrutiny and support from fostering would be available to those family members. This would be subject to the family members agreement.

The staying over care may also be arranged to enable a child or young person to experience social or leisure pursuits which they would not otherwise have an opportunity to experience.

Approved staying over carers may be also be needed on some occasions, especially in short term situations when the child doesn’t yet know the carers wider family. It will be important that the child is provided with the staying over carers ‘Welcome to our home’ booklet and is introduced to the carers prior to their stay. The young person must see the carers profile before they move and the staying over carer must make sure that they make the young person welcome; for example having their favourite meal ready etc.

Staying over carers should be provided as a minimum with the child’s care plan, delegated authority documentation and any risk assessments in place. Staying over care arrangements should be carefully reviewed at each review of the child’s care plan or statutory review, or more frequently if necessary, and at the foster carers annual review. The arrangements must always be based on the needs of the child and to maximise placement stability.

**Children living with foster carers for long periods**

For foster families where there has been a formal decision that the child will live with them for the long term, any staying over care arrangement should be agreed at the beginning of the planning process. In the main, the agreement to provide a child with a home for the long term should imply an emphasis that the child is part of the fostering family and as such the need for staying over care should be minimal.

Where it is anticipated that staying over care may be part of the child’s plan as outlined above, attempts should be made to identify members of the extended family who may be able to provide this having completed all the relevant statutory checks. If possible, arrangements for staying over care should be the same as those the family’s own children experience.

The planning of holidays is a significant event for families and as such foster children should be able to have these experiences and not be excluded. If foster carers plan to have a holiday without their foster child they should also have plans for another holiday with their foster child as well. It is not acceptable in the vast majority of circumstances for a foster family with a child living with them on a long- term basis to have a holiday with their own family and not offer this experience to their foster child. Any such plans should be discussed with the supervising social worker.

If it has been agreed that the foster family will have a holiday without their foster child who is living with them for the foreseeable future the holiday should not exceed more than 7 days unless in exceptional circumstances and discussed with supervising social worker prior to booking. This is based on the consideration that it is unusual for children in ordinary families to be away from their primary carers for over 7 days.

**Financial Arrangements**

Provided it is intended that the child will return to that foster home, the skills fees should continue to be paid to the primary carer up to a maximum of 14 nights in one year.

The primary carer will also continue to receive 33% of the age-related allowance for the period of staying over care.

Any additional nights should be negotiated.

The staying over carer will receive 67% the age-related allowance for the staying over care episode.

The supervising social worker will need to inform the finance department when a staying over care arrangement has been made. If the carer is an approved carer, the finance department will be able to arrange payment to that carer. If the staying over carer is a member of the foster carers’ wider family and not a formally approved staying over carer, payments cannot be made directly to them from the authority. However, the payment will continue to be made to the primary carer in order for them to pay their staying over carer directly. Again, the supervising social worker will need to inform the finance department regarding the staying over care arrangements. The amount to be paid to the staying over carer should then be indicated in the remittance advice the primary carer will receive.

Foster carers will be paid an annual allowance to contribute to the costs of taking foster children on holiday. Should there be additional costs incurred by the carers in order to include a foster child with specific needs on holiday (such as a single room supplement) this should be discussed with the supervising social worker and within reason should be paid by the authority.

These arrangements should be outlined in the foster care handbook.

**Holiday Periods**

In South Gloucestershire we know that most carers who are looking after a child over a holiday period (Summer, Christmas, Easter etc) will include that child in family holiday plans, particularly when the child is living with the carers on a long-term basis. We strongly encourage this. Children and young people have very clearly told us that they love to go on holiday with their fostering family. It is our expectation and our hope that all foster carers will want to take their foster children on holiday with them, especially if birth children are going too, unless there are compelling reasons why they are unable to.

If no children are currently living with the foster carers then the fostering team will be mindful of carers holiday plans and try not to place children with carers where holiday plans are imminent. This is far from ideal for carers, as well as unsettling for children.

Some carers, who look after children on a short term or emergency basis, will be unable to make holiday plans to include children, as they may not know far enough ahead, which children they will be caring for. Where this is unavoidable, arrangements should be made for the child to be looked after elsewhere for the period of the foster carers holiday, taking into consideration the above guidance.

**Flexibility**

It is not possible to allow for every eventuality within this procedure for the management of staying over care and carers breaks. With this in mind consideration will be given and a common sense approach adopted to manage those circumstances which arise outside of this. However, supporting continuity of care for children and young people in a stable foster home will take precedence over any other consideration.