

Children's Services

Guidance for social work visits; seeing children alone

1. Purpose

- 1.1 Our core tri.x procedures for Children's Social Care and for Safeguarding Children make clear that children should be seen alone during the course of any social work visit. (For the purpose of this guidance, 'alone' means without their parent, connected person carer or foster carer; social workers may sometimes require support from another professional in order to communicate effectively with the child, for example.)
- 1.2 The requirement to see a child alone in the course of a visit is made clear by the following extract from the tri.x guidance on Safeguarding Assessments; similar requirements are stated in the guidance for Social Care Assessments, visits to Children in Care, and visits to children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in Residential Settings:

'The child should participate and contribute directly to the assessment process based upon their age, understanding and identity. They should be seen alone and if this is not possible or in their best interest, the reason should be recorded. The social worker should work directly with the child in order to understand their views and wishes, including the way in which they behave both with their care givers and in other settings.'¹
- 1.3 This guidance sets out the types of circumstances in which it may not be 'possible' or in the child's best interests to see them alone, and it is therefore acceptable to see them only with their parent, connected person carer or foster carer.
- 1.4 Sometimes a child will refuse to see a Social Worker alone. The Social Worker should respect this refusal in the first instance unless they have immediate reason to believe that the child has been influenced, pressurized or coerced into making it. However, they should discuss any such refusal in supervision, and agree with their supervisor an action plan for encouraging the child to engage.

2. Reasons it may not be possible to see the child alone

- 2.1 Understanding the voice and experience of the child is at the heart of good social care practice:

'The Children Act 1989 (as amended by Section 53 of the Children Act 2004). [...] requires local authorities to give due regard to a child's wishes when

¹ [Assessment \(proceduresonline.com\)](https://www.proceduresonline.com), viewed 13 Jan 2023

determining what services to provide under Section 17 of the Children Act 1989, and before making decisions about action to be taken to protect individual children under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989. These duties complement requirements relating to the wishes and feelings of children who are, or may be, looked after (Section 22 (4) Children Act 1989), including those who are provided with accommodation under Section 20 of the Children Act 1989 and children taken into police protection (Section 46(3) (d) of that Act)

- 2.2 Some children have not developed the ability to formulate or communicate their wishes verbally. This could be because they have not yet reached this developmental stage (they are too young), or they are prevented from verbally communicating their wishes by disability.
- 2.3 Even in these circumstances, it is almost always possible to gain insight into a child's wishes and feelings. A disabled child may simply need the right sort of equipment or support to communicate effectively. A child who is pre-verbal or only starting to speak may be able to communicate much through structured play activities. The tri.x guidance referred to at 1.2 makes clear that it is not simply a matter of hearing the child's voice; observing their behaviour when with their family and alone may reveal much about a child's wishes and needs.
- 2.4 Where a child or young person does not use words to communicate, social care officers should take care to give them the fullest opportunity to express their views or wishes in other ways. This may involve seeing them several times, perhaps with different family members or professionals present, and in a range of settings.
- 2.5 Only where it is clear that the types of strategies set out at 2.3 cannot be effective may the Social Worker conclude that it is not possible to see the child alone.
- 2.6 Where it is not possible to see a child alone, the Social Worker will record this, and the reason for their decision, in the Visit Report and on the relevant Mosaic form. In explaining their decision, they will not simply refer to the age or disability of the child but will show analysis as to how these factors render a meeting alone with the child impractical.

3. Reasons it may not be in the child's best interests to be seen alone

- 3.1 As set out at 2.1, seeing a child on their own is usually essential to ensuring that their wishes are at the heart of the social care pathway. However, in exceptional circumstances, seeing a child alone may not be the best way to understand their views and wishes.

- 3.2 Children who have experienced certain types of trauma may only feel safe and be themselves when an already-trusted adult is present, and this may be their parent (for example, a non-abusing parent in cases of intra-familial abuse).
- 3.3 Some disabled children may only feel confident communicating in the presence of someone with whom they have already established successful communications, and again, this may be their parent.
- 3.4 These and similar reasons may mean that it is not in the child's best interests to be seen alone. Where the Social Worker believe this to be the case, they will record this, and the reason for their decision, in the Visit Report and on the relevant Mosaic form.