**West Sussex – Practice Guidance**

IROs are qualified social workers with at least five years’ experience, and who have acquired the right skills to carry out this role.

**Social visits including overnight stays**

* Children who are looked after in WSCC children’s homes will be supported to access the same opportunities as other children who remain living with their families. This includes social visits and overnight stays with peers which are an important element to developing and maintaining positive friendships.
* Decisions on practical arrangements for social visits and overnight stays should normally be delegated to residential care staff. The arrangements for this should be included in the child’s Placement Plan in line with the Care Plan taking account of any relevant court directives. These will have been agreed with the child’s social worker at the time the child moves in.
* When the child's placement is made, information regarding significant relationships and friendships should be obtained as part of this process and should be reviewed as appropriate.
* Any new friendships or requests for overnights will be considered by the child’s social worker and Registered Manager.
* The Placement Plan should clarify occasions when residential staff should consult with the child’s social worker and parent.

**Social visits by other children to the children’s home**

* Children will be encouraged to develop friendships with appropriate peers outside of the home and supported to arrange social visits in the home.
* Invitations to other children to visit the child at the home will be led by the child or child in agreement with the Registered Manager and/or keyworker.
* However, there may be occasions where the person being invited may present a known risk to the child and the Registered Manager may decline to support the visit. If this is the case, they must document full reasons for denying the visit and discuss this in full with the child.
* Where the friendship is being encouraged, staff must discuss and agree the visit in advance with the child and establish a clear plan of the arrangements for the visit. This should include timings, likely activities on offer, mealtimes and endings.
* Other children resident in the home must be informed of planned social visits.
* The visitor will be informally briefed of any safety arrangements and expectations of them while in the home. Any refusal or behaviour that contravenes these guidelines may result in the visit being ended early.

**Risk assessing visits and overnights stays away from the home**

* Overnight stays with friends are a regular part of most children’s lives and often occur at short notice. It is neither practicable nor desirable to carry out police and other formal checks on the adults resident in the friend’s household, unless of course there are particular reasons for concern.
* However, where a child is regularly staying with a friend, or for a prolonged period, it may be necessary to undertake checks on members of the household. The child’s social worker should be consulted and arrange checks to take place as necessary.
* When considering a request from a child to stay overnight with a friend, staff need to base their decision on the following factors:
* Are there any relevant restrictions in the child’s Placement Plan?
* Are there any factors in the child’s past experiences or behaviours to preclude overnight stays?
* Are there any grounds for concern that the child may be at significant risk in the household concerned or from the activities proposed?
* Is the child staying with another child or children, rather than staying solely with an adult?
* The age and level of understanding of the child;
* What is the purpose and length of the overnight stay?
* Whose idea was the overnight stay?
* How well is the friend or family known to the child?

**Before the visit/overnight stay takes place**

* Where staff propose to agree to the child’s stays away, before allowing them to go ahead, certain enquiries must be made by the team; for example the name of the adult who will be responsible for the child, the means of contacting the adult and the child during the visit/stay and the arrangements for the child’s return. There should be clarity about the sleeping arrangements and what the arrangements are.
* Prior to the child’s stay away, staff should arrange to meet the adult who will have responsibility for the child unless he or she is already known in which case the prior arrangements can be made over the telephone.
* The arrangements for supervising or caring for the child must not compromise the safety of the child or that of any one else; and the following considerations should apply:
* Have the arrangements been confirmed with the parent of the friend or the adult who will have responsibility during the visit?
* What are the arrangements for the child returning to the home?
* Is there a contact number for the household in which the child will stay?
* Is the child aware of what to do if he or she wants to return to the home earlier than planned?
* Does the child have a contact number for staff where they can be reached at any time?
* Does the child have access to a mobile phone?
* In all cases, discussions should be held with the child, dependent on his or her age, as to what, if any, information should be shared with other adults to enable them to look after the child appropriately. This might include:
* Any specific health care needs of the child;
* Any established routines for the child;
* Any behaviour management problems which, if the adult is unaware of, could lead to difficulties during the visit, for example the child may be over familiar with adults or over assertive with younger children.
* Any decision to share information should be on a ‘need to know’ basis and recorded.
* If satisfied that it is appropriate to allow the child’s stay away, a decision to allow it to go ahead may be made.
* The decision and the arrangements agreed should be recorded in full in the child’s Support Plan and related records.

**After the visit/overnight stay**

* Even if it has been agreed that the social worker does not have to be consulted in making these arrangements, they must still be informed as soon as practicable afterwards (within 1 working day) and the social worker should inform the parents as appropriate.

* With older teenagers, there may be a greater risk to their safety and wellbeing as they explore and test greater levels of independence. This applies to children living at home as well as to those who are looked after by a Local Authority and it is inevitable that in some cases, despite the care taken, things will go wrong. This does not mean that staff should discourage opportunities for appropriate social contact but instead ensure all reasonable risks are taken into account.

**Links to related resources:**

Guide for Visitors and Parents