

Wiltshire Council: Families and Children's Services

Returning Children Home from Care – Guidance Note

The Guidance Note should be read in conjunction with the Reunification (Returning Home) Policy for Children and Young People who are Accommodated (tri.x) and the relevant sections of the Practice Standards.

1. Background

It is recognised, and reflected in research, that the best outcomes for children and young people are achieved when they can live safely with their parents. When this is not possible, it is likely that the next best option will be for them to live within their wider family network. Only when these options are not available to a child should they become the responsibility of the local authority.

It is expected that Permanence will be secured for all children in care; there are four established forms of permanence, recognised by the DfE in Guidance; these are adoption, long term fostering, Special Guardianship and a return to parents. It is the latter of these options which is the subject of this Note.

Research indicates that most children and young people who are in care, return home at some point. This can either be because of a planned move or through a spontaneous decision to return. It is also known that most care experienced young people return home in some capacity when they reach 18 and beyond. It is important that practitioners understand these routes to reunification and ensure that it is regularly considered, in a proportionate and appropriate way, throughout care and pathway planning. Children and young people should know that this can be an option as should their parents and step-parents. It is especially important that discussion takes place with parents and that they understand the likelihood of the return of their child, even some considerable time in the future.

2. Key Messages

Returning Children Home from Public Care (SCIE November 2015) includes the following key messages:

- Returning from public care to live with a parent is the most likely “permanence option” but, for maltreated children, the least successful.
- ...there is consistency in research findings...able to identify some of the essential components of the social work services and practice most likely to improve decisions about which children can safely go home and promote the welfare of those who do
- For families with complex needs, high-intensity, relationship-based social work and multidisciplinary team around the family approaches, provided for as long as needed, can help motivated parents to meet the needs of children returning home from care

3. Key Features

The same research indicates that there is “agreement among researchers” about the characteristics of children and parents associated with unsuccessful reunification. Therefore, practitioners must be able to mitigate against these factors and provide additional, targeted specific support when planning a return home or supporting a return which has happened. Child specific factors include:

- Poor physical and/or mental health problems
- Behaviour problems

- Being of a certain ethnic background; primarily African-Caribbean or dual heritage, in the UK
- Being an infant or toddler, or aged 10 or over
- Involvement in criminal activity

Family characteristics that have a negative impact upon the return home include:

- Poverty and related environmental stresses such as poor or unstable housing
- Single carer status combined with money worries
- Parental substance abuse and/or poor mental health
- Domestic abuse
- Neglect as the main form of maltreatment
- Parental ambivalence about the parenting role
- Lack of social support
- A larger number of parental problems

Thinking about Social Care involvement, a return home is less likely to be successful where:

- There have been multiple placement changes
- The child has lived outside the family network, especially in residential care
- The child returns to a household where family problems are unresolved
- There has been lengthy involvement with welfare services before the entry to care
- There have been previous unsuccessful attempts at reunification
- The return was precipitate and there was an inadequate support plan after the return

Research has also been undertaken by Elaine Farmer et al, at the University of Bristol (Farmer E. and Patsios D. (2015) Evaluation Report on Implementing the Reunification Practice Framework, Bristol, University of Bristol.) It also identifies key features in relation to returning home. (The Framework referred to in was published by the NSPCC in 2015 and has partly informed Wiltshire Council's approach to children returning home from care.)

In this research, identified factors related to successful return home included:

- Children went to a changed household
- Thorough assessment including a case history
- Adequate preparation for the return home had been provided for parents and children
- Specialist services were provided for the parent and/or child
- Foster carers or residential workers supported and worked with the parents or children towards return home and were available to help afterwards
- Parents and older children had informal support from wider family, friend or people in their communities
- Children returned to their parents only after sufficient time had elapsed for the problem that led to the original admission to have been addressed. So, returns home that happen gradually, over longer period of time Have most success
- There was consistent and purposeful social work and monitoring with the child and parent(s)
- Conditions were set for parents before return home
- There was clear evidence of parental change

Factors associated with reunification breakdown included:

- Children were over the age of 10

- Children have had previous failed returns home – additional help will be needed for these children and families
- Children have behavioural or emotional problems – additional help will be needed for these children and families
- Insufficient assessment and workers lacked knowledge of the child’s history
- Weak planning, particularly evident when returning home children accommodated under Section 20 – who were then left too long in abusive circumstances without services to safeguard them. Children may then miss out on the chance of achieving permanence away from home, if that is needed
- Service provision was inadequate – either services were insufficient, or provided too late, or were not intensive enough, or ended too soon to meet the severity of the parents’ needs in order to make and sustain change
- Parents’ problems had not been addressed or remained unresolved or hidden, especially alcohol or drugs problems which were highly related to repeat maltreatment
- Parents were ambivalent about the return and/or were isolated

There are some commonalities in the sets of features. Within the usual planning and review processes that social workers, managers and Reviewing Officers use for children, these factors should be considered at all times and used to directly inform planning. The existence of “negative” factors does not mean that a return home should not be considered or will fail. It does indicate that there is likely to be specific activities or aspects of support that are needed to overcome the particular issue or factor. This emphasises the importance of the use of chronology and history – to identify what has happened in the past and what needs to change in the future.

4. Implications for Practitioners

The SCIE research concluded with the following implications for practitioners:

- If there is a possibility of returning children home, identifying this at an early stage, and providing services to overcome the problems that led to care, could improve the experience and outcomes for children and parents
- The importance of social workers’ empathy for parents whose child has needed to be in care cannot be overestimated. During contact visits and after return home, social workers should anticipate that parents (and older children) are unlikely to be totally honest about difficulties, and that effective engagement will require them to combine respectful vigilance with persistence and resourcefulness in their attempts to help
- Analytical assessment based on accurate data from multiple sources and case planning and reviewing that focus on changes made and capacity to sustain them, are essential elements of effective practice when reunification may be a possibility
- Well managed and facilitated contact does not necessarily increase the likelihood of return home, but it can keep relationships alive and smooth the process, should return home become the preferred plan
- Within the context of an honest and dependable casework relationship, a range of social work methods and approaches can be effective in both achieving return home and ensuring the placement with parents meets the child’s needs. Crisis intervention theory (with troubled teenagers as well as parents) takes advantage of the impetus for change that can follow entry into care. Skills in advocacy to ensure that parents’ and children’s’ practical, educational and therapy needs are met, are likely to result in more collaborative relationships

- Children who are separated from foster carers to whom they have become attached may be especially at risk of abuse after return home, due to difficult behaviour as a reaction to loss. In such cases, the social work plan should include careful monitoring of the child's reactions to the change of parent figure
- Residential workers should express any concerns they may have about a plan for return home, and give their views about any services that will be necessary to safeguard and promote the child's welfare, including any continuing role they can play

By inference, practitioners should always be mindful of these implications and construct plans which take them into account at all times.

5. The Process

There are clear and established processes for working with children and families before, during and following a child being in care, this includes how to carry out a Placement with Parents assessment for children returning home where there is a Care Order in place. There is a reunification policy within the on-line Tri-X procedures. This Guidance Note does not supersede or alter established policy and practice. It provides information for social workers and managers to take into account at all stages of working with families and where reunification should be considered and discussed.

All usual child care procedures should be followed

6. Conclusion

The local authority, and its staff, have a responsibility, as Corporate Parents for children in care, no matter how long they are "Wiltshire's children", to do all that is possible to ensure best outcomes. This means that the voice of the child must be heard, understood and taken into account, along with the thoughts and opinions of the parents, family and anyone who holds Parental Responsibility. Where the local authority has PR, there should still be positive partnership working at all times.

The best permanence option for a child or young person should be sought. The question about a return home for a child in care should always be kept "live" and the question asked, in a proportionate and non-disruptive way, at appropriate times in the planning and reviewing process and as other opportunities arise. It should never be a surprise for parents that a young person talks about returning home at 18 plus or simply decides to do so. We have to prepare the parents for the return just as much as the children.

Social workers and their managers should look at the key factors summarised in this Note and use them to inform the support made available to families. Where there is evidence of negative factors being present, plans and activities should reflect what is needed to counter them. Where there are positives, these should be emphasised and built upon in order to promote resilience within individuals and relationships and help to overcome the negative factors.

A safe and enduring return home is the most positive outcome for a child or young person who has experienced the care system.

Matthew Turner

Service Manager – Care and Placement Services.

April 2019