

## FAMILY TIME POLICY

SEPTEMBER 2021

(Review September 2022)

### 1. PURPOSE OF THIS DOCUMENT

Following consultation with Wirral's children and young people looked after, the term Family Time has been used as opposed to supervised contact. The young people requested that contact with their family which is supervised by the local authority and or its partners is referred to as Family Time. As such the terminology used within this policy i.e., "Family Time", reflects this.

This policy outlines Wirral Council's approach to Family Time. The policy applies to children looked after who have contact with: their parents; anyone with parental responsibility (who is not a parent); siblings; any relative, friend or other connected person. The policy does not apply to arrangements for social visits and overnight stays.

Wirral Council's Policy on Family Time places a greater emphasis on the quality and duration of Family Time as opposed to the frequency. In doing so we acknowledge that each case is unique, and this may influence decisions in the application of this policy.

### 2. STATUTORY FRAMEWORK

A Local Authority has responsibility to make every effort to promote contact between children who are Looked After and their families under Schedule 2 Children Act 1989 unless it is not practicable, or it is not consistent with the child's welfare.

In addition to the Children Act, Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998 defines the right to family life, and a failure to promote contact at the right level could be contrary to this.

In order for children and young people's welfare to be secure, it is recognised that in some situations, a family may need to be supervised. Family Time will enable a child to spend time with parent/family member with a trained staff member on hand to ensure it remains safe and in their best interest.

### 3. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- The child's best interest and welfare are paramount
- Family Time activities are meaningful and Children, Young People and their families are supported to get the most out of their time together
- Children's views should be taken into account in Family Time arrangements
- Children/young people should have the right to enjoy their time with family
- Family Time should be planned with a purpose. It needs to consider the capacity of the people involved to cope emotionally with the arrangements
- Family Time arrangements are dynamic and flexible so that they can be adapted to accommodate changing plans for a child's future
- Family Time arrangements should be reviewed and never allowed to drift, so that what is provided continues to meet a child's needs taking the full circumstances of the case into account
- It should be acknowledged that any supervision of Family Time, however skilfully done, can be intrusive for families and careful consideration needs to be given to the level of supervision required.

- The environment for Family Time should be safe and child focused
- The reasons for Family Time should be clearly recorded and the role of the supervisor(s) defined.

#### 4. FAMILY TIME ARRANGEMENTS

This policy applies to children and young people who are:

- Subject to Care Proceedings
- Where proceedings have ended and children and young people remain in the care of the local authority
- Children/Young People whose parents (carers) may have restrictions placed upon them as a result of significant risk/harm that may present to a child. (These restrictions may be by virtue of an alternative court order or directions).

Winter 2015 has noted:

"Positive meaningful relationships are crucial to overall health and wellbeing. Children and young people have a right to identity, including association and contact with their families of origin where congruent with their best interests."

As a Council we recognise this as an important responsibility and endeavour to ensure our children and young people can and do maintain these relationships.

##### 4.1 SUPERVISORS

In all cases the initial consideration should be as to whether family members, friends or foster carers can assist in the supervision of Family Time, but not where it might place the safety of the child, supervisor, or proceedings in jeopardy.

A meeting with family members should be held to identify if there is anyone in the family that can take on the role of supervision of Family Time.

There will be cases where more than one Supervisor is required due to family dynamics/risk or number of persons attending the Family Time session.

Supervisors will be trained and skilled in working with families to enable them to ensure Family Time is child focused and enjoyable to the child/young person.

##### 4.2 WRITTEN AGREEMENT

All Family Time will only commence once, a planning meeting has taken place to formulate a written agreement with those Adults attending.

The written agreement will outline dates, times, methods/venues, and expectations of family members. This agreement will clearly outline the consequences of failed or negative Family Times and should be attached as an appendix to any court Care Plan.

Once completed and signed by the parent(s) the plan will be forwarded to the Social Worker for their

records and reference purposes and a copy is given to parents. (See [Family Time – Parent / Carer Agreement](#))

### 4.3 RISK

Family Time often carries an element of risk and therefore careful planning is required. A risk assessment will be undertaken and reviewed regularly. Any Family Time arrangements may be subject to change in accordance with the risk assessment.

### 4.4 LOCATIONS FOR FAMILY TIME

#### 4.4.1 Venues

Wirral Council will provide suitable venue for the purpose of Family Time where assessed as necessary. Where Family Time is facilitated in a venue designated by Wirral Council, we will ensure that it is suitable for purpose and is compliant with Health and Safety requirements and COVID secure.

#### 4.4.2 Online

Virtual Family Time will be considered for a proportion of Family Time and facilitated if this is assessed to be in the child's best interest. This may be an option in cases where: there is a large amount of travelling required; there is a high amount of Family Time required (e.g. 5 days per week); the wider family wish to be involved in Family Time; the child misses pets at home, or the parent struggles to attend Family Time for one reason or another. Virtual Family Time should be facilitated through Microsoft Teams where possible, if this is not possible appropriate guidance should be provided to ensure the virtual methods used are safe and secure.

Virtual Family Time must also be considered by all parties as an alternative on any occasion when Family Time may otherwise be cancelled. For example, if a family member has no transport available, or cannot afford transport, if a family member is not well enough to travel but could communicate remotely.

#### 4.4.3 Community

Community Family Time will be considered and facilitated if this is assessed to be in the child's best interest. It is expected that a risk assessment will be completed to determine whether this is appropriate. Community Family Time can include for example, a parent taking the baby for a walk in the park in the pram; taking older children to the park, going bowling, or to the museum, etc.

**Note:** Community Family Time does not include sessions such as swimming and attending the cinema.

### 4.5 SIBLING AND OTHER FAMILY MEMBERS FAMILY TIME

Maintaining Family Time with siblings from both and same, or different, parents is reported by children to be one of their highest priorities, (The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations- Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (2015)). It is not always possible or appropriate to place sibling groups together. Where siblings cannot be placed together, it requires the active involvement of all parties to facilitate Family Time between them.

Sibling Family Time and Family Time for other family members and significant people in the child's life should follow the same procedure and general principles outlined above. Sibling Family Time is to be

promoted as a priority and as much as possible if it is in the best interest of the children. The parent's views on contact with relatives and friends should also be obtained.

#### 4.6 WEEKEND FAMILY TIME

In the event where the child may have extra-curricular activities, or has expressed that they would rather have Family Time during the weekend and/or the parent's own commitments, then consideration is to be given to the child having weekend Family Time with their birth family.

#### 4.7 USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Wirral Council recognise that for some children, young people and their parents may wish to have Family Time through the use of social media. This may be through telephone, text, Face Time, and other social media platforms. Any arrangements will be agreed and dependant on the age and individual circumstances of the child/young person.

#### 4.8 FINANCE

Wirral Council do not provide financial support to facilitate Family Time. It is the expectation that the parent/carer provides all necessary provision to support the sessions.

In exceptional circumstances funding may be offered at the discretion of the Social Worker and Team Manager where it is evident that the family is experiencing hardship.

### 5. FREQUENCY OF FAMILY TIME

- Frequency of Family Time will vary from case to case. It must be acknowledged that some children are involved in multiple Family Time arrangements which, if not carefully managed, allow them little time to form attachments with their carers, develop routines and stability.
- Sen and Broadhurst 2011 state, 'Support for family contact is underpinned by theories of attachment and the need for continuity with the negative impact of separation. Family contact can help a child maintain their sense of identity and come to terms with what has happened to them.'
- Young children who are removed from harm and provided with secure caregiving are able to form an attachment to their new carer. However, this attachment can be compromised if family contact with the child's birth family is not sensitively handled (Schofield and Simmonds, 2011).
- Infants who have frequent Family Time with their birth family may suffer constant disruption to their daily routines and may be unable to experience the kinds of settled caregiving they need to help repair the harm they have experienced. Such Family Time arrangements can produce high levels of stress for the infant through discontinuity of care and potentially insensitive care during Family Time. It can then be a challenge for carers to help the infant to relax and trust them and may compromise the child's development.

The quality of Family Time between the child and their parent is the overriding feature to ensure maximum benefit for the child. Frequency, method, and duration will be informed by:

- Previous level of Family Time with child (non-resident parent /extended family);
- Purpose of Family Time, i.e. assessments;
- Emotional capability of the child and parent to cope with the Family Time;
- Views of the child;
- The potential disruption and stress to the child' caused by the family time arrangements;
- Ages of children;
- Previous parental engagement with Family Time service.

The table outlines the Department's view on frequency of Family Time depending on age of the child. We aim to be flexible to accommodate all requests for Family Time. However, this will be dependent on demand, the ages of children will be considered. For example, children under school age will be allocated times between 9am -2.30pm this will allow school age children to attend from 3pm onwards.

Age	Maintaining Family Time during the assessment period	Safety and reunification	Identity – adoption, SGO, Long-term fostering
0-2	1.5 – 2-hour sessions 3x per week	2-hour sessions 3x per week; overnight to be considered dependent on the care planning and outcome of court proceedings and whether reunification is likely.	Dependent on the outcome of the Final Care Plan
3-4	2-hour sessions 2x per week	2-hour sessions 2x per week; overnight to be considered dependent on the care planning and outcome of court proceedings.	Dependent on the outcome of the Final Care Plan
5-10	1-hour (after school) 2x per week	1-hour session, 2x per week and then 1x 2-hour session at the weekend; overnight depending on the care planning and whether reunification is likely.	Dependent on the outcome of the Final Care Plan
11-16	2-hour (after school) session once per week	1.5-hour weekday session 2x per week; overnight depending on the care planning and whether reunification is likely	Dependent on the outcome of the Final Care Plan

### 5.1 BANK HOLIDAYS

Wirral Council are unable to provide a service on the following Bank holidays:

- Christmas Day
- Boxing Day
- New Year's Day
- Good Friday
- Easter Monday
- May Day
- Spring Bank Holiday
- August Bank Holiday

### 6. CASES IN COURT PROCEEDINGS

- In most cases Family Time of two sessions per week of 90 minutes duration would be an appropriate starting point. This would allow a child to balance Family Time with other social commitments. In considering overall Family Time arrangements, in general all children should have at least 2 days per week when they are free to enjoy normal social activities within placement.
- Parental family time with newly born babies and infants may be higher, particularly if mother is breastfeeding, though sessions may be of shorter duration. There is increasing evidence that even 5 times a week is disruptive and stressful for the baby or infant and that such frequent Family Times should be avoided to allow the child to settle in its new placement.
- When considering Family Time for infants it is important to note that infants leaving their secure base and separation from a primary figure can create anxiety and distress. The Kenrick study 2009 found that significant levels of infant distress were reported where high levels of family contact took place; long periods spent commuting to and from family contact; disruption to day-to-day routine and leaving their foster carer at important points in their development, were contributing factors to long lasting adverse effects. Consideration for virtual Family Time may be appropriate in these circumstances.
- If parents are presenting separately and each wish to be assessed as a sole carer for the child, a level of two times per week with each parent may be appropriate even though this is slightly more intrusive. In such circumstance's attempts will be made to arrange Family Time with each parent consecutively thus reducing frequency.
- Wirral Council will, when considering frequency of Family Time, ensure the primary consideration will be the interests of the child, but resources are not a wholly irrelevant consideration and impact on foster carers may be relevant as this may in turn have an impact on the child.
- In considering the needs of the children and whether Family Time is in their best interest, Wirral Council will not facilitate levels of family time in excess of 2 hours a day for more than 3 days per week. When required, and the circumstances suggest that increased family time may be necessary, the Head of Service for the Social Work Team would consider such requests and make a decision, consideration may also be given to virtual family time.



## 6.1 SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP & SUPERVISION ORDERS

Children and young people where there are a Special Guardianship Orders and / or a Supervision Orders, may in some cases be offered Family Time whilst there is ongoing Local Authority intervention. Support will depend on the Special Guardianship support/Supervision Order plan that will outline frequency, duration, and venue. At the end of Local Authority involvement, the plan will identify which family member is to supervise Family Time between child/ren and parents.

### 6.1.1 PROCEDURE FOR AGREEING SUPERVISED CONTACT TO CONTINUE POST SPECIAL GUARDIANSHIP ORDER AGREED BY THE COURT

In order to ensure that for families where a Special Guardianship Order is the most appropriate permanence plan, that they are not prevented from applying for such Orders where contact still requires supervision:

- All SGO support plans should have clarity in their planning and assessment of contact prior to the SGO being granted within the court.
- In circumstances that require contact to be supervised, this will be undertaken by the SGO carers, other family member or friend, and their suitability to do so assessed prior to the making of the SGO.
- Where family members or family friends are unable to supervise contact because the risk is too high/unmanageable, then the Local Authority can support and assist the SGO carer/parent to identify suitable community resources that could support contact. This support may include mediation and training. The Local Authority can consider financial support for a specified period of time based upon assessed need.
- Any proposal for supervised contact involving the local authority continuing post the SGO being granted should be reflected within the SGO support plan. The duration of this will be determined by the assessed need and require recommendations at the appropriate panel/meeting, and subsequent approval from the ADM.
- There will be at least a one yearly review with a family support worker focusing on the SGO support plan. This could potentially take the format of a family meeting/family group conference. This would need to take account of the increasing age and needs of the child as well as any increasing/reducing risk factors.

## 7. TRANSPORT ARRANGEMENTS

There is an expectation that carers will transport all children in their care to their Family Time sessions and remain with the child until the parent(s) arrive, thus ensuring that the child is not left alone with a supervisor.

In exceptional circumstances, for example, the carer does not drive, alternative arrangements will be arranged to transport the child to and from their carers to have Family Time with their parents/birth family.



Supervisors will not transport families to and from Family Time sessions. It is the family's responsibility to make their way and fund their own transport. Funding will be offered at the discretion of the social worker and Team Manager where it is evident that the family is experiencing hardship.

## 8. RECORDING FAMILY TIME SESSIONS

During each Family Time session, observational reports are completed. These reports are to incorporate and capture the child's lived experience before, during and after their family time with their parents and /or siblings.

## 9. CHANGES/AMENDMENTS TO FAMILY TIME ARRANGEMENTS

Changes to Family Time sessions may sometimes be necessary dependent upon the circumstances and the impact on the child. Any changes to Family Time sessions i.e. the day, time, method, and venue must be discussed with the family/carers and Children's Services with the reasons for these changes.

In instances where a child who is subject to Family Time arrangements is being taken on holiday by their carer, is unwell, or where the parent or child has appointments and is not able to attend Family Time etc., it is the responsibility of the Social Worker to inform the Family Time coordinator in advance. **(Minimum 7 days' notice for holidays and where possible 24 hours' notice for children who are sick).**

In the event where Family Time must be changed outside of the court ordered arrangements, legal advice is to be sought, for example reduction, because of the negative impact of Family Time on the child.

### 9.1 REPLACEMENT SESSIONS

Where Family Time arrangements are changed such as due to the unavailability of Family Time providers, if possible, a replacement session will be arranged; a virtual Family Time session may also be considered where appropriate. The responsibility to make new /alternative arrangements lies with the relevant personnel involved, ensuring details regarding the new arrangements are shared with all parties.

## 10. REVIEWS (Open Cases)

Regular reviews of Family Time arrangements will take place at a minimum of 6 and 12-week intervals and more frequently should issues arise that need to be discussed. The Family Time arrangements should also be reviewed in any Placement Planning Meeting and at the child's Looked After Reviews.

External agencies will also complete reviews via telephone calls, e-mail or meetings with Social Worker and provide written reports to LAC Reviews.

### Reviews should consider:

1. Quality of Family Time;
2. Volume/Frequency/ Method of current arrangements;
3. Child's life balance;
4. Parents commitment;
5. Child's Care Plan.

## 11. QUALITY & EVALUATION- SERVICE USER CONSULTATION/FEEDBACK

Family Time should be a meaningful and positive experience for children/young people and their families. In order to deliver a quality service, Wirral Council is committed to seeking the views of children, young people and families that will use the service. Service user feedback will be collated on a quarterly basis and used to monitor and review the service provided.

## 12. REFERENCES

Children's Act (1989) section 2: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/schedule/2>

Kenrick, J (2009) Concurrent Planning: A Retrospective Study of the Continuities and Discontinuities of Care, and Their Impact on the Development of Infants and Young Children Placed for Adoption by the Coram Concurrent Planning Project. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F030857590903300403>

Schofield G and Simmonds J (2011) 'Contact for infants subject to care proceedings. Family Law, June 2011; Schofield G and Stevenson O (2009) 'Contact and Relationships between Fostered Children and their Birth Families' in Schofield G and Simmonds J (eds) The Child Placement Handbook: Research, policy and practice. London: BAAF

Sen, R Broadhurst, K. (2011) Contact between children in out of home placements and their family and friends: a research review. [www.research.lancs.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/contact-between-children-in-outofhome...](http://www.research.lancs.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/contact-between-children-in-outofhome...) In: Child and Family Social Work, Vol. 16, No. 3, 08.2011, p. 298-309.

Sinclair, I., Gibbs, I and Wilson, K. (2005) Contact between birth families and their looked after children: some evidence of their effects; <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1989/41/schedule/2>

Winter, K. (2015) Supporting positive relationships for Children and young people who have experience of care. <https://pure.qub.ac.uk/>