

TITLE:	Family Time Service POLICY, STATEMENT and GUIDANCE
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AUTHOR:	Luke Froment
APPROVED:	Andrew Borwick-Fox

SUFFOLK FAMILY TIME

POLICY, STATEMENT and GUIDANCE

It is our aspiration that all children have time with the people that are important to them, known as 'family time', where this is safe, in the child's best interests and is meaningful for the child.

Suffolk Council will promote, encourage, and facilitate family time between looked after children, their families of origin and others who have played an important part in their lives.

Care planning and reviews will establish arrangements for family time, this will be led by the allocated social work team. However, this needs to be in consultation with the Family Time Service, prior to the initial court hearing. This can include but is not limited to Legal Strategy Meeting or Achieving Permanence for Children Panel to ensure the proposed family time plan is proportionate and reasonable considering the child/ren's age. This will ensure the children's needs are met and their best interests are promoted.

Where it is deemed necessary for family time to be supervised, the reason for supervision and the arrangements for recording and reporting of family time will be carefully considered and clearly recorded.

Suffolk Council will ensure that every effort is made for Children in Care to maintain links with their family, through face-to-face family time. Alternative indirect family time supervision can be considered in exceptional circumstances and facilitated via video or telephone calls.

FAMILY TIME GUIDANCE

Purpose of Family Time

The primary purpose of all family time is to promote and maintain the relationship between the child and parent/relative whilst the child is placed with alternative carers (including other family members).

Family time takes place when a child is looked after. A family time supervisor is present during the session between the child and parent(s)/relative.

Family time may take place irrespective of whether the plan is for reunification or long-term placement outside of the family.

s.34 of the Children Act 1989 places a duty on Local Authorities to provide family time unless it is not reasonably practical or consistent with the child's welfare, and to promote family time between children who are looked after and their parents.

The following factors will apply to:

- provide a safe environment where family time can take place.
- provide an opportunity for observation of the family time between the child / parent / relative.
- contribute evidence and information to an overall assessment of the child / parent / relative relationship.
- provide a structured period of time for a specific activity or play opportunity between a parent/relative and child.

Introduction to Family Time in Suffolk

Family Time Teams are located at:

- Riverside Family Hub, 6 Canning Road, Lowestoft Suffolk, NR33 0TQ.
- Brooks House, 306 Norwich Road, Ipswich, IP1 4HD
- West Suffolk Contact Centre, 16 Fornham Road, Bury st Edmunds, IP32 6AH

Family time will be offered on weekdays only.

Monday to Friday – 9:00 to 17:00

1. Legal Context

1.1 If a child is looked after, a local authority has a duty under the Children Act 1989 (CA 1989) to promote and encourage family time between the child and 'any other relative or person connected with [them]'. However, the child's welfare remains paramount.

1.2 Family time arrangements must be put in place at the point at which a child is accommodated (irrespective of court involvement). Family time arrangements must be set out in the child's care plan and reviewed at each Child in Care Review (CICR).

1.3 Under schedule 7 of the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review 2010. The local authority must have regard to the arrangements for family time and whether there is any need for changes in order to promote family time between child/ren and parent, or between child/ren and other connected persons.

1.4 In addition Regulation 14 of the Fostering Services Regulations 2011 places a duty on fostering services to promote family time between a child placed with a foster parent and his/her parents, relatives, and friends unless such family time is not reasonably practicable or consistent with the child's welfare.

1.5 Parents must be fully involved in planning family time arrangements. The views of the child must be sought according to their age and understanding. The views of the carer should also be sought in order to ensure that all aspects of the child's welfare are considered.

2. Referral Criteria

Referrals for family time should be made using the electronic referral form on LCS. Social workers should refer to the family time referral procedure and LCS guidance prior to completing this.

2.1 Family time can be:

- court ordered.
- part of the care plan for a Child Looked After under an interim care order (ICO) or care order (CO).
- part of a care plan for children accommodated under s.20 CA 1989, (where the child is subject to ongoing Public Law Proceedings)
- subject to a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) as part of transitional planning.

2.2 The Family time service cannot facilitate family time for children subject to s.17, s.7, s.37, Supervision Orders, Child Arrangement Orders or Adoption Orders.

2.3 As a guiding principle, family time will only be supervised for young people aged 15 years and older when there is an immediate risk of physical, emotional and/or sexual harm, or if the young person has a significant disability or lacks mental capacity.

2.4 A child accommodated under s.20 may not need family time to be supervised. Family time referrals will be considered by the Family Time Service and ONLY supported if a child is the subject of ongoing care proceedings.

2.5 For children who are made subject to Care Orders the allocated social work team should provide clear planning to consider how family time can step away from the formal support provided by the Family Time Service. The step-away plan should be finalised within 12 weeks of the final hearing where the Care Order is made. This plan should be informed by a Family Network Meeting (to take place 8 weeks after the final court order) and include input from the main carers for the child.

2.6 The aim will be for any supervision of family time to be facilitated in a way that is more natural for the child, ideally by safe and appropriate adults that have a relationship with the child. This might be someone from the wider family network, the child's carer, or someone from the carers support network.

2.7 The Family Time Service will continue providing family time support for 16 weeks from the date of the Care Order being granted, after which the ASW will need to have put in place alternative family time arrangements. The step away plan could consider but is not limited to a family time supervisor, supervising Social Worker, and the ASW supporting an identified family member or foster carer to supervise family time safely and in an appropriate way.

2.8 In exceptional circumstances this period can be extended by the Head of Service for Care and Support for Looked After Children. For example, if the risk of family time with certain family members requires supervision and no one else can provide this. This agreement should be detailed in the child's support plan, including timeframe for this decision to be reviewed.

2.9 It is not expected that the Family Time Service will provide family time for children subject to an SGO on an ongoing basis, but it is understood that some new special guardians will need support initially when an SGO has just been granted. For this purpose, the Family Time Service can offer transitional support including family time planning for up to six weeks.

2.10 The Family Time Service will require 5 working days between receiving a referral and facilitating Family Time.

3. Frequency & Duration of Family Time

3.1 Frequency of family time should be within the levels set out below:

Age	Frequency	Duration
Under 1	Up to 3 days a week*	Up to 1 hour per session
1 year up to and including pre-school	Up to 3 days a week during school hours	Up to 1.5 hour per session
Primary school	Up to 2 days a week	Up to 1.5 hour per session
Secondary school	Up to 1 day a week	Up to 1.5 hour per session
When Care Order is obtained or long-term care	Maximum of 16 weeks family time support	Tailored family time step away plan**

** For very young infants under 6 months old and when breastfeeding is taking place the family time frequency may need to be temporarily increased and regularly reviewed. However, this decision needs to be balanced alongside the need of the infant settling and adapting to new routines.*

*** Unless in exceptional circumstances as identified in section 2.8.*

3.2 Requests for higher levels of family time within the court arena (length and / or frequency) need to be challenged. It is important to ensure that practitioners emphasise that the frequency of family time must be in the **child's** best interests and balanced with supporting placement stability. Higher levels of family time can undermine a placement, preventing a child from settling and adapting to new routines, and taking advantage of new opportunities offered by their carer(s). It is therefore important when recommending family time levels that the ASW clearly evidences the

reasons for their proposals. Despite this, if a court **orders** family time at levels above those recommended, the Family Time Service will meet these.

3.3 During Care Proceedings the purpose of contact has four main elements:

a. *Assessing:*

- *Parental commitment.*
- *Emotional availability to the child (attunement).*
- *Basic parenting skills (feeding, playing, changing).*
- *Willingness to take advice.*

The work of the Family Time Service will contribute to assessment information within legal proceedings. The Child's Allocated social worker will consider information provided by the Family Time Service as part of their assessment and evidence to the court. Records of Family Time will be included in the court "bundle" and Family Time Practitioners may be called to provide verbal evidence to the court in some cases.

b. *For the parent to have the opportunity to retain or build a relationship/familiarity (not to be the primary attachment figure) and to be able to enjoy spending time together.*

c. *To enable a child to experience a parent as a familiar figure.*

3.4 The purpose of family time should be clearly stated in the child's care plan and CICRs chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO). The family time referral form should consider the benefits to the child, the likelihood of family time being safe, and a parent's attitude towards this. Risk assessments are required for every adult attending family time prior to this being able to commence. The Family Time Service should also have information about any child/ren who is planning to attend, who is not known to the service. Family Time Practitioners can be invited to CICRs.

3.5 The family time plan will need to consider the educational needs of the child and children of school age will be offered after school slots during term time. Babies and pre-school children will be offered morning slots fitted around nursery or pre-school education.

3.6 If a baby has school age siblings it may be necessary for the baby to join a proportion of after school sessions.

3.7 All family time will try to consider the foster carer's right to some uninterrupted family life.

4. Family Time Venues / Community

4.1 Most face-to-face family time sessions will be held at:

- Riverside Family Hub, 6 Canning Road, Lowestoft Suffolk, NR33 0TQ.
- Brooks House, 306 Norwich Road, Ipswich, IP1 4HD
- West Suffolk Contact Centre, 16 Fornham Road, Bury st Edmunds, IP32 6AH

If a child is placed at a distance from Suffolk and it is not in their best interests to be transported to Suffolk, consideration will be given by the Team Manager within the Family Time Service as to whether a suitable location should be sought near to the child's placement and whether an agency should be contracted to supervise the family time. If community family time is taking place, the Family Time Service need to be made aware of the venue 10 working days in advance via the ASW.

4.2 Family time can be held in a child's placement with the agreement of their carer or in the community (this would usually be for older children). These arrangements need to be supported by a robust risk assessment, completed by the ASW, that takes account of the different risks involved in such family time sessions. All community family time requests must be approved by the social worker and family time manager before the community can be considered.

4.3 Community family time sessions will be reviewed every 12 weeks or sooner if deemed appropriate, and family time will be transferred to a Family Time Centre if it is not felt to be beneficial for the child. Community family time sessions will be returned to a Family Time Centre if any safety issues are identified, potentially at short notice.

4.4 If **three** consecutive family time sessions are missed, then this will trigger an urgent family time review, and we may need to consult legal colleagues if the case is in proceedings. Where there continues to be persistent, missed sessions or behaviours displayed that are likely to negatively impact on a child/ren this will be shared with the allocated social work team and legal colleagues. If changes are proposed in terms of the frequency or length of family time, then the ASW will need to consult with the IRO to ensure their views are considered.

4.5 Usually, one contact supervisor will be appointed for each contact session unless Family Time Service managers feel two supervisees are required following consideration of the risk assessment undertaken as part of the family time referral process.

5. Bank Holidays and Weekend Family Time

5.1 Family time cannot be provided on Weekends or bank holidays. At Easter, family time cannot be offered on the Saturday after Good Friday and before Easter Sunday.

5.2 It is recognised that the Christmas period is a time when many families would like to have family time as close to the 25th December as possible, but unfortunately this will not be feasible for all families. Christmas family time sessions will conclude on the 23rd December or the Friday before this date. A limited service will be offered between Christmas and New Year.

6. Transportation

6.1 It will be the responsibility of children's carers to **transport** children to and from family time venues and activities. This must be agreed as part of the initial placement

planning discussions between the ASW and the carer. If a carer does not drive or there is no public transport, the ASW should make alternative arrangements for transport. In exceptional circumstances the Family Time Service can be asked to assist but this will need to be agreed by the Head of Service for Care and Support for Children Looked After.

7. Family Time Agreement

7.1 Families having family time provided by the Family Time Service will be required to sign a Family Time Agreement which sets out what family time means and what is expected of them when they attend. This is to enhance the quality of family time for the child and keep everyone safe. The Family Time Agreement **must** be signed by each parent / family member before the first session after it has been explained to them by the child/ren's ASW. The Family Time Agreement must be signed by the child's allocated social worker, child's carer and family time manager prior to starting family time. If a parent has not arrived or contacted the Centre and is not there 15 minutes after the session was due to start then the session is cancelled and the child is returned to placement.

7.2 The Family Time Agreement makes clear that the family time supervisor will intervene if they become concerned about anyone's behaviour or the impact of the session on the child and have the power to terminate if they feel this is necessary.

8. Service Expectations

8.1 Before each family time, the supervisor will observe how each family member is presenting and follow any guidance outlined in the Supervised Contact Referral Form. They will make a judgement as to whether a person is presenting in a way that would make the family time unsafe for the child or anyone else. They can make the decision that the family time should not go ahead.

8.2 The Family Time Service will promote opportunities to strengthen the relationship between the parent/s and foster carers, allowing them to meet and interact, including at handover where appropriate and safe to do so.

9. Illness/contagious

9.1 All parents and foster carers are required to follow the guidance and direction of the Family Time Service in relation to family time regarding illness and medical advice to keep everyone safe and well. All recommendations and guidance from the National Health Service (NHS) and Public Health England (PHE) will be referred to and followed in relation to providing services to children. These include, but are not limited to contagious diseases, making babies bottles, feeding, healthy eating and overfeeding.

9.2 When parents miss a family time session without informing the Family Time Service a replacement session will not be arranged. If family time arrangements are changed through no fault of the parents eg a supervisor or foster carer is unavailable, a replacement session will be arranged. There may be occasions when family time has to be cancelled at short notice. The reason for the cancellation must be clearly documented on LCS by the Family Time Practitioner.

9.3 Suffolk Council is committed to openness and equality, treating all children and families with dignity and respect. No child or family will be discriminated against because of their disability, colour, ethnic or national origins, race, gender, sexual orientation, and political or religious beliefs. Services will be developed to ensure that minority groups have equal access to services that promote children to remain in their families and which provide alternative care for those children who become looked after.

9.4 Everyone working at and attending Suffolk Family Time Centres or having Family time in the community must be able to do so safely. Aggressive, abusive, or violent behaviour will not be tolerated, and family time will cease immediately if any person acts in such a way. Such behaviour may be reported to the Police and could result in family time being refused or suspended.

10. When Family Time can be Refused

10.1 The court has the power to make an order allowing a local authority to refuse family time between a child who is looked after and a named person under s.34.4 CA 1989. A local authority can also refuse family time for a maximum of 7 days without court approval if it believes it is necessary to safeguard or promote the child's welfare under s.34.6 CA 1989. The reasons for this must be explained in writing by the ASW. If a local authority wishes to continue to refuse family time after 7 days, it must apply for a court order. The court can make an order authorising the refusal of family time for as long as it considers it to be in the child's best interests. Where a family time session has been suspended, a review meeting with the parent/s and the Family Time Service is required prior to this recommencing.

10.2 Changes to family time arrangements should be part of a child's CICR unless it is urgent and cannot wait.

10.3 There are occasions /events that may cause Family Time to be cancelled at short notice in the best interests of the child. (for example, illness or adverse weather conditions) Any such decision will rest with the child's allocated social worker who should make the decision in collaboration with relevant other parties.

11. Support for parents / family members

11.1 Family time practitioners understand that family members may feel distressed during family time sessions when they say goodbye to a child, or they may be upset about their personal circumstances. Family time practitioners will try and support them and, in conjunction with their ASW, will encourage them to find people within their connected family network who can help them.

11.2 Parents will be required to have an induction at the Family Time Centre prior to the first family time session to familiarise themselves with the setting and with the family time process. As part of the induction parents will be required to sign a Family Time Agreement. There is also a request that parents wait for children to leave the vicinity of the Centre before leaving themselves.

11.3 The ASW **must** be present for the family time induction of any new family member/s and the first family time session, unless not deemed appropriate. The ASW

will, alongside the family time supervisor, ensure that the Family Time Agreement has been clearly explained and signed, prior to the initial session taking place.

11.4 The ASW will provide clear direction to both the Family time manager, parents and child (if the child is at an age where this would be appropriate). This direction will provide everyone with what will be assessed during Family time sessions and how support will be provided.

11.4 Foster carers are invited to share a Communication Book with family time supervisors and birth family members setting out the child's routine and information about the child's diet, development, and interests.

12. Family Time Observation

For Children in Proceedings

12.1 In line with best practice, there is an expectation that the ASW will supervise family time at intervals. As a minimum, this will include the first family time session and then at least every **eight weeks**, and the last session before final court hearing. This will enable ASWs to observe family interactions to inform their assessment, care planning and subsequent reviews.

For Children who are Looked After Long Term

12.3 Where family time supervision is required, in line with best practice, there is an expectation that the ASW will supervise some family time. As a minimum, this should be **one family time session prior to each CICR**. This enables the ASW to observe family interactions which will inform their assessments, care planning and subsequent reviews.

12.5 For children who are made subject to Care Orders the allocated social work team should develop a step away plan as highlighted above in section 2.7.

For Children where Early Permanence arrangements are in place

12.6 For children who are subject to early permanence arrangements the ASW **must** have held a face-to-face meeting between the birth parent/s and the early permanence foster carer/s prior to the initial family time session.

13. Photographs/Mobile Phones

13.1 Photographs can support birth family members and the child to have memories of time spent together. Family time supervisors can take photographs during the session, which will then be emailed to the ASW for review and distribution to family members.

13.2 Photographs will be kept on the Child's LCS record. They will not be sent to an external agency or other person without written agreement from the ASW who will need to confirm consent from the parent/s has been provided as appropriate. The ASW may request the photographs to complete a Life Story Book for a child.

13.3 Photographs can be taken on special occasions including the first family time session, birthdays, developmental milestones, educational celebrations, meetings with new family members and religious and cultural events.

13.4 For the protection of children and to promote quality family time, all family members are encouraged to focus on being present and engaged during the session. Family members and children must not use mobile phones during family time sessions, as this can create a distraction. In addition, this prevents children having the opportunity to view messages which cannot be seen by the family time supervisor, or for phone calls/video calls to be initiated with adults or family member/s, who may not have been risk assessed for family time and/or approved by the ASW.

13.5 Staff may only use a mobile phone during family time for taking photographs, safety purposes eg if they need assistance because a child needs to leave the family time room, or in an emergency.

14. Meals & Snacks

14.1 Food and snacks are a part of a family's lifestyle and are usually encouraged during family time to promote social interaction and communication. ASWs may be asked to confirm special dietary needs with birth family members.

14.2 Children should receive nutritious food during family time and family members are expected to ensure food they bring is healthy. High sugar or 'junk' foods will be declined by the family time practitioner and must be taken home by the person who provided them.

15. Interpreters

15.1 Where English is not the first language of a parent and/or child an interpreter being present for family time will need to be considered by the allocated social work team at the point of referral. If an interpreter is deemed to be required, then this **must** be arranged face to face. The Child's allocated social worker will book interpreters following consultation with Family Time Service.

15.2 Should the booked interpreter not attend, unfortunately the family time session will be unable to take place. All efforts will be made to prevent a session being cancelled.

16. Foster Carers

16.1 Foster carers are expected to update on the presentation of a child/ren prior to handing over to the family time supervisor at the start of the session.

16.2 If anything significant arises in the family time session, the supervisor will immediately alert foster carers on the handover at the end of the session.