Information sheet for workers

Family Networking with children looked after or leaving care

Background.

Norfolk started rolling out Signs of Safety across the children's workforce in 2014. The aim was to ensure a restorative and relationship-based approach was taken to protecting children by 'working with' rather than 'doing to' children and families.

The children's workforce does not yet consistently involve wider family and network members in assessment and planning. Furthermore, where a child comes into the care system because no one in the family and wider network can provide them with the stable home they need, they often lose touch with the child. The current system for children who are looked after, and care leavers does not do enough to ensure those that provided love and care to the child when they lived with their parents, are able to continue to do so when they are in foster or residential care.

Norfolk is embedding Family Networking to ensure that all those connected to the child who can be a source of emotional, physical, mental, spiritual or cultural support are able to engage with workers and those caring for the child. This will provide opportunities to make a positive difference to the child's everyday life and give support where required, to have a relationship with the child where this would be in the child's long term best interests.

This way of working enables parents and families to take more ownership of the concerns and risks and be part of putting a plan together with workers to keep children safer and healthier.

What are the principles of Family Networking?

1. Every child/parent has a family and/or network and they can be found if we try
2. A meaningful connection to their family or network helps a child develop and maintain a sense of belonging
3. The single factor most strongly connected with positive outcomes for children is meaningful, lifelong connection to their family and/or network

How does it work when the child or young person is looked after/leaving care?

Worker Authenticity- Firstly you need to check that you and all those caring for the child or young person are willing and able to support a network meeting, and that you will take seriously the plan the young person and their network put forward as long as it is safe and in their best interests and long-term stability.

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Consent - The child or young person should be spoken to about the people who are most important to them, and whether they would like to involve those important people in plans to create a lifetime of support for them.

Finding - the worker, working directly with the child or young person identifies members of the network. Start with a genogram or ecomap or use safety circles or mobility mapping to help you. Think about exploring the contact they have with supportive people currently e.g. on their birthday, Christmas, or other religious/cultural events, or people who they have positive contact with on social media as well as who provided positive support in their past. This might involve a combination of carers, family members, friends, family or carers friends or professionals.

Engagement - Contact those people identified to see if they would be interested in attending a meeting to help the child or young person and potentially become part of the young person's network of support.

Meetings - The first meeting should be used to establish rapport between members of the group. All meetings should also have some ground rules to ensure everyone feels safe. The members should be empowered to decide what these should be, and suggestions could be offered about listening, not interrupting, and taking a break where needed. The number of network members attending should be greater than professional support, and the first meeting should be used to see if anyone from the network has been missed out who could helpfully be included.

It is likely that more than one meeting will need to take place before the network is properly defined and there is understanding about the commitment from network members to support the child/young person long term.

The Plan - Any plans that the network put forward will need to be shared with the IRO if the young person is under the age of 18. The child or young person's social worker will need to include plans that the family network makes into the Care Plan and/or Pathway Plan. The Care Plan/Pathway Plan should be shared with all those attending the network meetings to make sure everyone knows what is happening.

There should only be one plan for each family network to be working to. Where the child/young person wants to involve network members in their LAC review, the review should be arranged around this.

Review - All family network plans must be regularly reviewed to check on progress. Follow up meetings should be arranged for network members to review the plan and make amendments depending on what has worked and what else needs to happen. These meetings should align with statutory responsibilities, but also take place more regularly where this would support the child/young person. The network should be working towards running their own meetings, as the young person is supported towards independence.

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A 'One plan' model

Working with a child, their family, carers and wider network should not be an 'add on' to the way workers work, but the way we all work. Similarly, we do not want family members to have two plans to work to, a social worker's plan and the family network plan. Where social workers and other workers are involved in children's lives, the responsibility of their welfare should be shared with the group, and everyone involved should know what the plan is that we are all working to that keeps the child safe and well looked after.

<u>Frequently Asked Questions</u>

What if the family is unsafe?

You won't know who is safe and able to offer a meaningful commitment to the child until you involve them. The likelihood is that families are far more aware of people who could present a risk than workers and will not agree plans that could place the child in any danger.

Is the idea to place children with extended family members/friends rather than place them in foster care?

Yes, where possible we want children to remain with parents or in the extended network, as research shows that this creates a better sense of their belonging and supports their long-term wellbeing. However, where this is not possible, we want to make sure good links are maintained with the child's network that supports their development while in foster care.

What about children who are already in foster care or residential care?

We do not want to disrupt stable placements or plans where permanence has been agreed through foster care. However, we know that young people transitioning to young adults will often rely on or need a combination of family, friends and support networks to provide support.

Does that mean foster carers will be left out of decision making meetings?

Not necessarily. For many young people in foster care, the foster carers family and friends will make up the extended network. Others may want to involve people from their community of origin as well. We want to ensure that all those who could provide the young person with support they need are offered opportunities to make plans and decisions with the young person and be part of their lifelong network.

Are we doing this already?

Yes, in some services this already happens. We need to make sure it is a consistent approach for all children and a shared vision across Norfolk.

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What about contact arrangements?

Contact arrangements will be discussed as part of the Family Network meetings. It is likely that involving more people in the planning will support contact and make it safer and more beneficial to the child. The aim is for contact to become a part of their life in the same way that other children see members of their family for days out. This can be agreed through reviewing the child's normal routines and activities in the network meetings (calendaring).

We would also like to work with carers to change our professional use of language around 'contact'. Many carers already use words that sounds better to children, e.g. 'family time', and we would like this to be reflected in children's plans.

Can the meetings have an informal approach?

Yes, absolutely. We will all need to think about the timing of meetings, venues, and refreshments to ensure the meetings are child/yp and family friendly. If a child is attending the meeting, this will need to be carefully planned so they are not overwhelmed, perhaps by building the network gradually or arranging for the child to attend just part of it. For younger children, the network may need to meet without the child present, at least initially, and they could be shown the plan using words and pictures the network put together for them, as well as photos of the meeting, before they attend in person.

What if a person is considered to be unsafe by the carer or network but the child wants to see them?

The SofS mapping tool can be used to explore risks and safety with the network; what we are worried about, what existing safety there is or could be, and what needs to happen. The child's welfare must be paramount, and they will need to be helped to understand if there are things that can't happen and why, using words and pictures to explain the reasons people are worried. The situation may be able to be kept under review if it is a situation that might change over time, use of a trajectory can help with this.

What will happen if the Family Network Meeting doesn't work out? E.g. the family/network member did not attend, or the venue isn't right?

The network, including the workers, will need to understand why a person didn't turn up. Sometimes parents and other important people in the child's life have their own vulnerabilities that need additional support. The meeting coordinator and network members will need to agree how they will explore this in the best interests of the child/yp. It is important that issues of commitment are not confused with genuine difficulties around timing/transport etc. Offering opportunities to share feedback about the meeting is also very helpful to ensure that everyone feels comfortable to attend.

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Sometimes children and young people do not always say who they are missing from the past, or this takes time. How will this be managed?

Children should always be given the space and time they need to think about the past. Social workers are being trained in undertaking life story work as well as having the Family Networking Training. Mobility mapping will need to be undertaken carefully to ensure that the questions stay focused on finding out who is/was helpful and supportive in the child's life, and do not get overtaken by problems or difficulties that may need more therapeutic space. Often the network will know about people in the child's network that the child/yp may not immediately remember, and this will need to be discussed with the child/yp.

How can the carer feedback things that the child has said about who they would/would not like to see?

Normally, the carer will be involved in the network meeting, but should also have a separate conversation with the social worker where this would be helpful. A partnership approach is essential.

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