

Connected Carer Policy

RELATED GUIDANCE

Children Act 1989: Family and Friends Care: Statutory guidance for local authorities about family and friends providing care for children who cannot live with their parents.

Family Rights Group, Initial Family and Friends Care Assessment: A good practice guide outlines what a viability assessment for family and friend carers should look like, what social workers should consider and how to undertake international assessments.

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1. Introduction

Children who are unable to live with their parents may be living with extended family members, friends or other people who are connected with them for a variety of reasons and in a variety of different arrangements. Some of these children may be looked after children under care orders (Section 31 of the Children Act 1989).

Connected Care is aimed at grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, close family friends or even neighbours. Anyone who has a positive and pre-existing relationship with the child or young person can become a Connected Carer.

This policy sets out how Barnet Council will support connected carers and the children they are caring for, provides information on the assessment process and details of the support that connected carers can access.

This policy is updated regularly and is accessible on the Council's website.

2. Values, Principles and Objectives

This policy is underpinned by the principles of the Children Act 1989; the key principle being that a child should be enabled to live within their families unless this is not consistent with their welfare.

Barnet Council is committed to ensuring that all children in the borough grow up as part of a loving family that can meet their developmental needs. Where possible, this should be with birth parents, or if this is not possible, with a relative or a member of the child's social network. Barnet Council will only place children in care if it is believed to be necessary and only for as long as they need to be in care.

Consideration of children's welfare and best interests will always be at the centre of the work we do, and children are at the centre of any decisions we make about them. Barnet Council will ensure that children are active participants, and their wishes and feelings will be considered in all relevant processes when adults are trying to solve problems and make decisions about them.

All connected care arrangements will be assessed to make sure that they are able to meet the child's specific needs and keep them safe. The assessment will take into account the particular situation of the child, carers and the relationships within the family. We will provide support for any such arrangements based on the assessed needs of the child and will seek to ensure that connected carers are provided with the support they need so they can provide care to the child.

In confirming the connected care arrangements for a child, Barnet Council will strive to fulfil our promise to all children in our care that states we, as Corporate Parents, will:

- Support children and young people to fulfil their dreams
- Be there for them, when they need us
- Support their mental and physical health
- Listen, communicate and make decisions together with them
- Support them to become independent and prepare for adulthood
- Celebrate their achievements, identity and culture.

You can find further information on our promise to all children in our care in our corporate parenting strategy:

https://www.barnet.gov.uk/sites/default/files/corporate_parenting_strategy_2021-23.pdf

3. Management Accountability

Management responsibility for the Connected Carer Policy rests with the Head of Corporate Parenting, whose service is responsible for commissioning all children's placements.

4. Legal Framework for children living away from their parents

4.1 The following statutory powers and duties provide the legal basis for departmental involvement in private/ informal family and friend care arrangements:

- The Children Act 1989
- The Children and Young Person Act 2008
- The Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations Volume 2: Care Planning, Placement and Case Review
- Family and Friends Care; Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities
- The children (Private Arrangements for Fostering) Regulations 2005

4.2 Children who are in need living with family

The local authority has a general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of children living within its area and to promote the upbringing of such children by their families.

When a family is referred, Barnet Family Services is obligated to carry out an assessment of the child to see if any services or support are needed to meet the child's needs or support the carer or family under section 17 of the Children Act 1989.

Where concerns arise in relation to the welfare of a child living with family, normal processes for referral and assessment under section 17 or section 47 of the Children Act 1989 will apply.

4.3 Private Fostering

A privately fostered child is a child under 16 years (or 18 if disabled) who is cared for by an adult who is not a parent or close relative and where the child is likely to be cared for in that home for 28 days or more. In a private fostering arrangement, the parent still holds parental responsibility and agrees the arrangement with the private foster carer.

A close relative is defined as:

- Parent or step-parent (or someone who holds parental responsibility)

- Grandparent
- Aunt or uncle (whether related to the child by blood or through marriage or civil partnership)
- Sibling (including half-siblings and step-siblings)
- Anyone who holds a court order granting parental responsibility for the child (for example, a Special Guardianships Order)

Barnet Council has a legal duty to ensure that children and young people in this situation are safe and properly cared for. Under the Children Act, parents and carers must tell the Council if they are entering into a private fostering arrangement six weeks prior to the arrangement commencing. The Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) Team can be contacted on 020 8359 4066 for advice on the process

Please note: it is an offence not to notify the Council of such an arrangement.

In Barnet the assessment, review and monitoring arrangements for private fostering are the responsibility of the Head of Corporate Parenting, in conjunction with the Head of Duty & Assessment, Intervention & Planning, Domestic Abuse and VAWG.

For further information please refer to Barnet's Private Fostering Statement of Purpose is available on the Council's website.

Further guidance on private fostering is also available:

<https://www.barnet.gov.uk/children-and-families/fostering-and-adopting/fostering-barnet/private-fostering/am-i-privately>

<https://www.barnet.gov.uk/children-and-families/support-parents-and-carers/looking-after-someone-elses-child/private>

4.4 Looked after children in family and friends' care

If, following an assessment, the recommendation is for a child to become looked after, we will first try to identify a relative or family friend who is able to care for them. The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010 state that any placement **must** always be formally assessed prior to placement of a child. (Reg 17). There are exceptions to this under Regulation 24 that allows for temporary approval of carers pending completion of the full assessment. However, this temporary approval expires after 16 weeks (extended to 24 weeks in some instances) hence the need for assessment and formal approval to be completed within that period.

Support services will be put in place by Barnet Fostering Support Teams, and this will include training for connected carers in accordance with Fostering Services Regulations, National Minimum Standards (NMS) and Training,

Support and Development (TSD) standards. Support will also be provided to the child to meet their needs, including a health plan and personal education plan. They may also be entitled to leaving care support services.

Looked after children living with connected carers will be supported by the case holding social work team within Barnet Family Services.

5. Permanence Options

For most children living with connected carers, whether in private arrangements or looked after by Barnet, the plan for their long-term care will be to return to their parents. If this is not possible, and they need to remain living with their connected carer, there are various legal options for carers to put the arrangements on a more permanent footing.

The legal orders will help carers share parental responsibility for the child with the birth parents; this means that they will have shared rights and responsibilities regarding the child, and this will allow them to make decisions on the child's day to day care and make plans for their future.

The legal orders set out below may be made either as an outcome of care proceedings initiated by the local authority or of applications made to the court by the carer.

5.1 Child Arrangements Order

A Child Arrangements Order (CAO) can be applied for by relatives who have been looking after the child, with the leave of the court.

Where carers have a CAO for a child, the child will be able to live with them and they will be responsible for their day-to-day care, sharing parental responsibility with parents. The order lasts until the child is 18 years.

Local authorities may pay a CAO allowance to support connected carers who choose to take out a CAO. This allowance is at the local authority's discretion and is means tested.

5.2 Special Guardianship Orders

Special Guardianship Orders (SGO) can be applied for by a child's carers who have been looking after a child for more than one year. When a connected carer is granted an SGO and becomes the child's Special Guardian, they will share parental responsibility for the child with parents but will have exclusive rights to exercise parental responsibility for the child in terms of their day-to-day care.

Special Guardianship provides carers with wider powers regarding the child's care but does not require a complete break with the birth family as in

adoption. For this reason, the order is suitable for children who are being cared for by family members or friends but who still have links with their birth parents.

5.3 Adoption Orders

A connected carer may apply for an Adoption Order for a child for whom they have looked after continuously for at least one year. An Adoption Order transfers all legal rights and responsibilities for a child from their birth parents to the adoptive parents and the child legally becomes part of the adoptive parent's family.

6. Financial Support

6.1 Financial support for looked after children placed with connected carers

When a child is looked after by Barnet, the Council is responsible for providing support.

Connected carers who are assessed by Barnet will be assessed as foster carers and receive the same fostering allowances as other Barnet foster carers. This is also applicable where temporary approval is granted whilst being assessed.

6.2 Child Arrangements Order

Entitlement to a CAO allowance remains at the discretion of the local authority where payment is intended to help meet the welfare needs of a child residing with a carer. Any financial support is not designed to replace benefits such as Child Benefits and Child Tax Credit and will not affect benefits entitlement. CAO allowances are means tested and are capped at the basic foster carer's rate minus child benefits.

6.3 Special Guardianship Order

Where the child was previously looked after immediately prior to the granting of the court order, the Special Guardianship Order (SGO) allowance will be paid, means tested and capped at the basic fostering rate minus child benefit.

Foster carers who are granted a SGO on a child in their care, will receive two years continued remuneration in line with the fostering allowance minus Child Benefit plus the reward element. After two years the reward element will cease and then be means tested capped at the fostering rate minus child benefit.

Any financial support is not designed to replace benefits such as Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit and will not affect benefit entitlement.

Please refer to our SGO Policy for further information.

6.4 Adoption

All adoption allowances are based on an assessment of need to ensure the child's care needs are met.

Please refer to government legalisation on financial support for adoption for further information.

<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2005/691/part/3/made>

7. Accommodation

The authority works with landlords to ensure that, whenever possible, connected carers living in social housing are given appropriate priority to move to more suitable accommodation if this will prevent the need for a child to become looked after.

8. Supporting Contact with Parents

All children who are living away from their parents should have an opportunity to keep in touch with family members where this is in their best interests. Where a child is living in an informal family and friends care arrangement, the carers should agree with the family on contact arrangements, 'where it is necessary to do so in order to safeguard and promote his or her welfare'.

As part of the support arrangements, it may be identified that specific assistance is required to ensure that any such contact can be managed safely. If necessary, information will be made available to connected carers about local contact centres and family mediation services, and how to make use of their services.

Where a child is Looked After by connected carers, Barnet together with the carers are required to endeavour to promote contact between the child and his or her family 'unless it is not practicable or consistent with the child's welfare'. The overall objective of the contact arrangements will be included in the child's Care Plan and the specific arrangements will be set out in the child's Placement Plan

9. Family Group Conferences

Family Group Conferences are meetings held between professionals and family members where they are helped to think through issues surrounding the care of a child who Barnet is concerned about, and to come up with their own solutions to achieve the best outcomes for the child.

The meetings are organised and facilitated by trained staff who are not part of the service working with the family (although they may still be employed by the local authority). The family group conference coordinator is independent from the caseworker, which means that they have not and will not be involved in making any decisions about the child.

Where Barnet is so concerned about the welfare of a child that it is considering legal proceedings, a Family Group Conference will be convened to help the family explore alternative care arrangements. Although there is no guarantee that Barnet will feel that any plan put forward by family members following a family group conference is suitable, experience suggests that in many cases families will be able to come up with plans which would perhaps not otherwise have been suggested. This meeting can assist the family to identify connected carers for the children if they cannot reside with their parents

10. Information on Services and Support

There are a number of services both locally and nationally that are able to offer advice and support to connected carers and to children and young people. The Fostering Support Team and the child's social work team will also assist in finding suitable support groups.

Further information about services and support can be found on the following websites:

<https://www.barnet.gov.uk/fosteringinbarnet>

<https://www.barnet.gov.uk/children-and-families/fostering-and-adopting/connected-carers>

<https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information>

<http://www.fosteringnorthlondon.co.uk/>

11. Complaints Procedure

Barnet Family Services aims to always provide the best possible service. Where a connected carer is unhappy with any aspect of our service or the decisions we make, they can make a complaint.

Barnet Council has a complaints procedure which sets out the process in relation to the three stages of our complaint's investigation process. Our aim would be to resolve any such dissatisfaction without the need for a formal investigation but where an informal resolution is not possible, then a formal investigation will be arranged.

Records of investigations and the outcome of complaints are held by the Family Services Complaints Team and the information is used for quality assurance monitoring and service improvement.

Information on how to make a complaint can be obtained from:

Family Services Complaints Team

London Borough of Barnet

2 Bristol Avenue

Colindale

London

NW9 4EW

Tel: 0208 359 7008

Email: FSComplaints@barnet.gov.uk

Information is also available to view at:

<https://www.barnet.gov.uk/your-council/contact-council/complaints/barnet-childrens-social-care-complaints-process>
