

## Lighter Touch Looked After Reviews

### Children in Care – Practice Context:

The Independent Reviewing Officer's (IRO) primary role is to quality assure the care planning and review process for each child accommodated in local authority care. Ensuring at all times, that the child's current wishes and feelings are being given full consideration.

Care planning and CLA reviews are ordinarily about bringing together children who are looked after, their families, carers and professionals. This is in order to plan for the care of the child and to review that plan on a regular basis.

The review of the care plan is one of the key components within the core processes of working with children who are accommodated and their families. It is the responsibility of the IRO to chair this review at regular statutory intervals.

The purpose of the CLA review is to consider the quality of the child's care plan, based on the local authority's assessment of the child's individual needs. The care plan for each individual child, must specify how the authority proposes to respond to the full range of the child's needs, taking into account their wishes and feelings.

### When would a 'lighter touch' review be appropriate?

When considering the appropriateness of initiating a *lighter touch* review process, this is not a decision to step away from the important function of reviewing a child or young person's care plan. Regular reviewing of their care plan will remain an integral part of a child's journey in care and an essential safeguard.

A move to *lighter touch* reviews, is a recognition that for 'some' children, the ongoing imposition of a formal CLA Review meeting, may no longer be purposeful, meaningful or in support of their best interests. In short, in some circumstances it is reasonable to ask – 'Is a formal CLA review meeting *for this child*, still required?'

There are a variety of unique and individual situations that may bring this question into focus. Amongst them, the common themes might be:

- • The child is settled within a long-term foster family.
- • The child is permanently matched with their foster family and have resided there for over a year.
- • The child's sense of identity and security within their foster family is challenged by a formal meeting being held.
- • A child has explicitly requested for reviews to be less frequent.

- A child's care plan is meeting their individual needs **in full**. There are also no obvious deficits in the care being provided to them, nor in the outcomes being identified.

### **When to initiate a 'lighter touch' review**

The allocated IRO would not consider a move to lighter touch reviews until a child has been long-term matched with their existing foster family. This would invariably mean that they have been in residence within the foster family for a period of at least 121 days. Matching would have taken place following the oversight of the Fostering Panel and for children over 14 years of age, via the Agency Decision Maker.

To consider a change in review process, the IRO would need to assess the current care plan in place and its implementation. Specifically, they would need to feel satisfied that the care plan is appropriate and is meeting the child's individual needs. The IRO will discuss with their manager in supervision any child who they feel meets the criteria for a lighter touch review.

Assuming all of the above are satisfied, at the next scheduled CLA Review, the IRO will put forward a proposal to move to a lighter touch model. This proposal will only be progressed with the explicit agreement of the child/young person, foster carer/s supervising social worker (SSW), social worker and where appropriate, parents/carers. If all parties are in agreement, the next formal CLA review will then be scheduled for twelve months' time.

Immediately following the review, the IRO must record this decision within the review recommendations (which will alert the SW team manager) and must notify the Quality Assurance Team Manager and Business Support Team. The allocated social worker must also record the decision within the child's updated care plan.

The rationale for this decision will also be recorded within the minutes of the CLA review by the IRO, which will then be distributed to all relevant parties within 20 working days. All lead professionals currently working with the child must also be formally notified of the decision to implement lighter touch review procedures by the SW.

It is recognised that the move to a lighter touch review model may also inform a discussion in regards to the frequency of social work visits to a child in care. Whilst these are in effect, two separate, but inter-connected decisions, they can be addressed simultaneously at the same CLA review. The visits to the child will be based solely on the child's needs and wishes and moving to 12 weeks visiting pattern is not automatic. This would be a discussion focussed on whether a move to twelve weekly, rather than six weekly visits would be appropriate for a child and one they themselves are in favour of. A decision to reduce the frequency of statutory visits, must be endorsed by the child and clearly recorded within the care plan and CLA review recommendations and minutes. It would be expected that the Social Worker will attend 3

the CLA review having made this recommendation on visits in supervision and clear TM sign off on the child's file prior to the review taking place.

It is important to note that when there are two or more siblings living in the same household this decision making process **must be applied to all children on an individual basis**. It must never be assumed that because one child's needs are being met through the lighter touch process that all other siblings needs will automatically be met by this process as well.

### **Implementation of the process**

Upon the setting of a formal review date in twelve months' time, the IRO will also set a mid-point review date with the allocated social worker. This date will be for six months' time.

This six month mid-point will be a desk-top review, not a formal meeting held at the foster placement. The Social Worker will need to produce an updated Review of Arrangements and Care Plan for this. At the mid-point review, the IRO will liaise with the social worker and any other party they feel necessary, in order to obtain a clear picture of how the child's care plan is progressing. As a minimum this will be a conversation with the SW. A record of this mid-point review will then be recorded on the child's file by the IRO. Included in this commentary the IRO must record whether they feel this process is continuing to meet the child's needs, or not.

This mid-point discussion will include the appropriateness of continuing with the lighter touch reviews for this child. If there are any concerns that this process is no longer meeting the child's needs the decision can, and potentially should be made to resume 'formal' reviews. The 'formal' 6 monthly review process will re-commence immediately. The IRO will note this on the child's electronic files and the rationale for the change. The IRO will also notify the Quality Assurance Team Manager and Business Support Team. The SW team manager will be alerted by the SW. The IRO will also discuss this with their supervisor in their next supervision.

At this mid-point review, the IRO will once again re-confirm with the social worker, whether the lighter touch review process still remains appropriate.

At all times the social work team retain an ongoing obligation to inform the IRO of any significant events/changes in a child's circumstances or care planning. Where these occur, the ongoing appropriateness of lighter touch reviews will be considered and a decision recorded on the child's file. A decision can be made to schedule a 'formal review' at any time, if a change in circumstances warrants a review meeting.

A child can also request at any time, in consultation with the IRO, that the next review, including the scheduled desk-top mid-point review, be changed back to a formal CLA meeting. It is their right to have a formal meeting held and IRO will ensure the child's wishes are respected.

Foster carers and supervising social workers have an important role to play in monitoring the continuing appropriateness of the lighter touch review decision. This 4

decision should become a routine part of every Foster Carers/SSW supervision sessions, whether they are either Local Authority or IFA foster carers. Both parties have a responsibility to alert the social worker and IRO if circumstances change that then call into question the continuing appropriateness of lighter touch reviews.

All professionals need to be mindful of points of transition e.g. moving from primary school; change of secondary school; change of social work team.

## Exceptions

There will be situations when a move to a lighter touch model may not be appropriate for a child's needs. There will also be circumstances when the model, whilst effective for a period of time, should now be reverted back to the traditional CLA review process. Below are what is described as *exceptions* when the model should not be adopted or when it has been adopted, but should now be reverted back.

- • If a child is unable to clearly articulate an agreement, be it via words or other communication tool. It should not be assumed that they are in support of a lighter touch model. In these instances, normal review processes should remain in place.
  
- • For children who are in court proceedings this process is not suitable. Once the proceedings have concluded the discussion regarding transitioning to the lighter process can be made at the first CLA review after the conclusion of proceedings.
  
- • For children whose first language is not English the lighter touch process cannot be considered until the differences between these two models has been carefully explained to them via an interpreter. This can be done by either the SW or IRO, and this conversation must be recorded on their electronic files
  
- • A child accommodated must have a CLA review held within 12 weeks of them turning 18 and leaving care. This is essential to ensure that appropriate plans have been set in motion to support their transition to post 18 accommodation. They should have at least two formal CLA reviews held between their 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> birthdays. Therefore any child where lighter touch reviews are already in place, must have this model changed back at the CLA review that precedes their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. They will then move back into having normal six monthly reviews for their final year in care.

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