

Support for family and friends carers in Camden



1 Introduction

Sometimes, children who cannot live with their parents are cared for by relatives or family friends. Camden recognises that being cared for by someone they already know is best for children and that is why the council wants to promote these family and friends care arrangements.

The council is also aware that family and friends carers are often caring for children under difficult circumstances. The children may have had a poor start in life and so have lots of needs. Carers may have given up work to care for the children, may not have enough space in their home and may be dealing with difficult family relationships.

This policy statement sets out how Camden, through the Children's Safeguarding and Social Work division (CSSW) will support people who are caring for other people's children and explains what kind of support they can get.

2 Why family and friends care?

When a child is unable to live with their parents, the best alternative is for the child to be cared for by a relative or family friend who is known and trusted by the child. For many children, going to live with a family and friends carer means that they don't have to come into care.

Family and friends care arrangements can mean children are able to stay in their local area and keep in close contact with parents, other family members and friends. It could also mean not having to change schools. This can help reduce stress when they are separated from their parents.

Family and friends carers are also more likely to have the same ethnicity, language, culture and religion as the child. This helps them to keep a positive image of themselves and means they feel that they fit in.

All these factors help children who are cared for by family and friends to get a better start in life than children who go to live with foster carers who are not known to them. For this reason, the law says that local authorities like Camden must try to place children who are looked after (also known as "in care") with a suitable family and friends carer rather than a stranger foster carer if this is possible.

3 Our principles

- The welfare of children will always be the main concern when making decisions about supporting family and friends carers.
- When deciding on where a looked after child should live, Camden will look at placing them with a family and friends carer rather than a “stranger” foster carer if this is in the child’s best interests.
- Camden can only support family and friends care arrangements that are best for the child and will use its legal powers to take action if it is thought the care arrangements do not keep the child safe.
- Support provided to family and friends carers will be based on the child’s needs and will not be dependent on the child being looked after by the council.
- Camden will only place children in care if the council believes this is necessary and only for as long as necessary.
- A Family Group Conference will be offered to all families who are considering family and friends care arrangements for a child as a means of avoiding the child coming into care.
- All family and friends care arrangements should be able to offer the child a permanent home if needed. Families will be encouraged to seek legal advice on the legal options available to them such as Special Guardianship Orders.
- Services and support will be tailored to the individual needs of the child with the aim of supporting family and friends carers and helping them to develop and improve their caring relationship with the child.
- Parents, family and friends carers and children will have their views and wishes taken into account and will be able to take part in decision-making regarding care arrangements.
- All family and friends care arrangements for looked after children 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 relationship within the family.

4 Role of Children's Safeguarding and Social Work (CSSW)

CSSW is the part of Camden council that is responsible for children's social services. CSSW has a duty to make sure children in the borough are safe and well, especially children who live away from home for whatever reason.

To do this, CSSW may carry out an assessment to find out if the child has any specific needs and decide if they need services to help them reach a good standard of development.

CSSW has a specialist Family and Friends Care service which is managed by the Adoption and Permanence team manager supported by social workers from the Adoption and Permanence and Fostering teams.

The service offers advice and support to family and friends carers and social workers working with the family, and carries out assessments on family and friends carers where this is a legal requirement because the child is looked after by Camden (see section 5).

5 Legal arrangements for children living away from their parents

5.1 Private family and friends care arrangements

These are arrangements made between the parent and a close family member to look after the child for a time whilst the parent is unable to do so and CSSW will not be involved in making any of the arrangements.

However, CSSW can 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. These assessments are carried out by social workers based in the Child in Need service who will also provide on-going social work support if this is needed.

5.2 Private fostering arrangements

Private fostering is where a child up to 16 years of age (18 years if the child is disabled) is looked after full-time for more than 27 days, by someone who is **not** their:

- parent or step parent (or someone who holds parental responsibility)
- grandparent
- aunt or uncle (whether related to the child by blood or through marriage)
- sibling (including half-siblings and step-siblings)
- anyone who holds a court order in relation to the child (for example, a Child arrangement order).

These are private arrangements agreed between the child's parents and the carer to look after the child for a time while the parent is away.

CSSW has a legal duty to visit the privately fostered child and assess the care arrangements to make sure that the child is safe and well cared for. This is carried out by the dedicated private fostering social worker based in the Fostering Service.

5.3 Looked after children family and friends care arrangements

Whenever a child needs to be looked after by Camden, CSSW will first try to identify a relative or family friend who is able to care for them. If the arrangement is likely to continue past 16 weeks, the law states that the carer must be formally assessed and approved as a Camden foster carer by the Family and Friends Care service.

This means that the carer will need to meet certain requirements and standards expected of foster carers, but the service will provide training and support for carers to help them achieve this. The service will also provide on-going training and support that takes into account the particular needs and circumstances of family and friends carers.

6 Long-term options for permanence

All children who are living away from their parents will need to know what is likely to happen to them in the future, for example where they will live and who will look after them. This is known as permanence and it gives a child a sense of belonging. For looked after children, their plan for permanence is part of their care plan.

For most children living with family and friends carers, whether in private arrangements or looked after by Camden, the plan for their long term care will be to return to their parents' care.

If this is not possible, and they need to remain living with their family and friends carer, there are various legal options for carers to help them put the arrangements on a more permanent legal footing.

The legal orders will help carers to gain parental responsibility for the child; this means all the rights and responsibilities that a parent would have regarding the child will pass to them and will allow them to take decisions on the child's day to day care and make plans for their future.

CSSW social workers are able to give general advice to family and friends carers about possible legal orders that they can apply for, but carers must also seek independent legal advice.

6.1 Child arrangement order (formerly known as a Residence order)

A Child arrangement order can be applied for by relatives who have been looking after a child for more than 1 year. Where carers have a Child arrangement order, 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.

Local authorities can pay an allowance to support family and friends carers who choose to take out a Child arrangement order, especially if making the order means the child will no longer be looked after. The allowance is means tested and reviewed annually.

6.2 Special guardianship orders

Special guardianship orders can be applied for by relatives who have been looking after a child for more than 1 year as an outcome of care proceedings. When a family and friends carer is granted an order and becomes the child's special guardian, they will share parental responsibility for the child but will have exclusive rights to exercise parental responsibility for the child in terms of their day to day and future 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 but who still have links with their birth parents.

Camden can pay an allowance to Special guardians; however this is based on an assessment for support needs. Any financial support is means tested and reviewed annually.

6.3 Adoption order

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 parents' family.

A family and friends carer may apply for an adoption order for a child for whom they care if the child has lived with them for 3 out of 5 years for private arrangements or after 1 year if the child was looked after. CSSW must assess the child, the birth family and the adoptive family for adoption support services.

7 Support for family and friends carers

7.1 Financial support for private family and friends care arrangements

If a child is living with family and friends carers as part of a private agreement with the parents, CSSW will generally expect parents to provide financial support for the child. If the arrangement is likely to be long-term, CSSW would expect parents to transfer benefits such as child benefit to the carer.

Financial support for family and friends carers will generally be limited to emergency subsistence payments that are paid to alleviate hardship or whilst waiting for other benefits to be transferred where the placement is made at short notice.

A one-off payment may also be provided at the beginning of the arrangement to help carers buy essential items such as bedding or clothing or to meet extra costs incurred because of the child's specific needs, for example medical conditions.

CSSW will only make on-going payments in rare cases where there is real financial hardship and the payments are needed to ensure the care arrangement can be sustained in the long-term. Carers will be expected to maximise income by ensuring they apply for all benefits and tax credits to which they are entitled.

7.2 Financial support for looked after children placed with family and friends carers

When a child is looked after by Camden, the council is responsible for maintaining them and providing suitable accommodation and support. This means providing full financial support for the child's carer.

Family and friends carers who are caring for a looked after child will be assessed as a Camden foster carer and will receive the same fostering allowances as other Camden foster carers.

An allowance will also be paid to carers who are awaiting assessment as a foster carer and are caring for the child under Regulation 24 of the Care Planning, Placement and Review Regulations 2010 where the child has been placed in an emergency.

7.3 Child arrangement order allowance

Camden may make on-going payments to carers who have a child arrangement order in respect of a child in order to support the care arrangement, but will only do so where:

- the child was previously looked after by Camden before the child arrangement order was made and the arrangement is for the child to live permanently with the carer
- the arrangement is being supported by Camden so that the child does not become looked after.

Payments are made only following a full assessment of the child's needs and the carer's financial circumstances, and may be subject to conditions such as regular reviews.

7.4 Special guardianship allowances

Financial support can be agreed as part of the special guardianship order support services and can be paid to:

- provide help for the special guardian to look after the child
- meet extra costs if the child has any special needs, for example medical needs
- provide basic equipment needed so the child can live with the carer
- support contact arrangements between the child and their birth family and other people who are important to the child.

Where the special guardian had previously been the child's foster carer before the order was made, a fostering fee may continue to be paid for up to 2 years after the making of the order. All payments made will be subject to certain conditions and detailed in the special guardianship support plan and will be reviewed annually.

7.5 Social work support

Any child who is either looked after or in need and receiving services and support from CSSW will have an allocated social worker. Family and friends carers who are caring for a looked after child and are being or have been assessed as a Camden foster carer will also have a supervising social worker from the Fostering Service allocated to provide them with support.

If a court order has been granted and the child stops being looked after, social work support varies depending on the child's needs and the carers wish to continue with support.

7.6 Accommodation

CSSW will work with colleagues in Housing to maximise housing options for family and friends carers where they need larger accommodation in order to provide a home for a sibling group. Social workers will advise carers regarding what action they can take either to secure public housing or help in accessing private rented accommodation. However support is limited to advocacy and sign-posting as all decisions rest with Housing.

7.7 Contact

All children who are living away from their parents should have an opportunity to keep in touch with the absent parent 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 parents on contact arrangements.

If contact arrangements are likely to be difficult because of the circumstances, social workers in the Family and Friends Care service can advise carers on how to manage arrangements and avoid conflict, for example through the use of mediation or contact centres.

If the child is looked after, Camden must make arrangements for the child to have contact with parents if this is in their best interests. Contact arrangements will be written in to the child's care plan and reviewed regularly. Rarely, Camden may decide not to let parents have contact with their child because it is thought to put the child at risk.

Camden recognises that for family and friends carers, managing contact can be a source of conflict because of difficult family relationships. Where this is the case, social workers and specialist family support workers can provide carers with advice on managing contact.

7.8 Family Group Conferences (FGC)

A FGC is a meeting of family members and others close to the family to talk about the needs of the children or young people and make plans for them. A FGC will be offered to any family who already has involvement with CSSW and there is a likelihood that the child may need to become looked after.

The meeting is an opportunity for the child's family and friends to look at alternative care arrangements that can avoid the child becoming looked after and agree what support is needed to make sure the arrangements are successful.

Camden has a high quality FGC service and families can discuss referral to the FGC co-ordinator with the allocated social worker.

7.9 Support groups

Camden's Fostering Service has a well-established Foster Carers Group that meets regularly with Fostering workers to discuss issues and provide mutual help. The service also uses a "buddy" system where newly approved carers can link up with more experienced foster carers for extra support and mentoring.

The Adoption and Permanence team also offers special guardian support groups for special guardianship carers. Additional support groups are available via the North London Adoption and Fostering Consortium and details are available from the Family and Friends Care service.

8 Complaints

Camden aims to provide the best possible service. If a foster carer or someone using or planning to use our service is unhappy with any aspect of our service or a decision we make, they can make a complaint. Most people don't like to complain but sometimes things do go wrong, or you may feel that there is a better way of doing them. If you tell us about it, we can try to put things right.

It is the responsibility of the staff or their managers based in the Family and Friends Care team to try to put right any concerns that you may have at the time you raise the concern. This local resolution is the first stage of the complaints process.

If the complaint cannot be resolved at the first stage it may become necessary for the complaint to be formally registered. This formal investigation stage is known as stage two and you have a right to go straight to this stage of the process if you wish. If the complaint is still unresolved after the formal investigation at stage two, a Review Panel may be requested, which is chaired by an independent person. This is stage three of the process.

We have a foster carers complaints procedure to manage those occasions when a foster carer is dissatisfied with the service provided to them by the division.

If a child or young person makes a complaint about services provided for them, then the Children Act complaints procedure must be followed. In this event a child or young person involved in the complaint will be entitled to an advocate to support and represent them in the process.

Advice on making a complaint can be sought from the Information and Records Management team who can be contacted in the following ways:

Freephone 0800 393 561
Fax 020 7974 1439

Write to:

The Complaints Officer
Freepost RSLT-RJBR-TXAA
London Borough of Camden
Town Hall
Judd Street
London WC1H 9JE