

# 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 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 Family Services and Social Work division (FSSW) 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. For many children, going to live with family and friends carers 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 be 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 carers 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 they need to be.
- 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 carer arrangements should be able to offer the child a permanent home if needed. Camden will make sure families are able to receive legal advice on their legal options such as Special Guardianship Orders.
- Services and support will be tailored to the individual needs of the child with the aim of supporting 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 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 relationship within the family.

## 4 Role of Family Services and Social Work (FSSW)

FSSW is the part of Camden council that is responsible for children's social services. FSSW 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, FSSW 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.

FSSW has a specialist Family and Friends Care service which is managed by the Adoption team manager supported by social workers from the Adoption 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).

Social workers who work with family and friends carers must follow the relevant policies and procedures which are listed below:

- Family and Friends care for children in need
- Family and Friends care for looked after children
- Private fostering

## 5 Legal arrangements for children living away from their parents

### 5.1 Private family and friends care

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

However, FSSW 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. If these are needed to help meet their needs and support the carer. These assessments are carried out by social workers based in the duty and assessment team. If on-going social work support is needed, the case is transferred to a social worker in a "Children in need" team.

### 5.2 Private fostering

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 residence 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.

FSSW 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**

Whenever a child needs to be looked after by Camden, FSSW 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 by Camden's Fostering Service as a Camden foster carer.

This means that the carer will need to meet the legal standards for foster care but the Fostering 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 a return to their parents.

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.

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

### **6.1 Residence Order**

A Residence Order can be applied for by relatives who have been looking after a child for more than 1 year. Where carers have a Residence Order 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.

Local authorities can pay a Residence Order allowance to support family and friends carers who choose to take out a Residence Order, especially if making the order means the child will no longer be looked after.

### **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. 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.

If a child was looked after by Camden before a Special Guardianship Order being made, FSSW must assess the child and carer's needs to see what support, including financial support, is need to make sure the care arrangements are successful. If the child was not looked after, FSSW may carry out an assessment for support needs.

### **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 parent's 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. FSSW must assess the child, the birth family and the adoptive family for adoption support services.

## 7 Support for family and friends care

### 7.1 Financial support for private family and friends arrangements

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

However, FSSW can provide financial support to carers if the child has been assessed as having extra needs and help is needed to support the care arrangement. When deciding on levels of support, FSSW will look at whether parents are able to contribute to costs.

Support will be paid:

- to provide emergency financial support while benefits are being transferred where the arrangement was made in an emergency
- as a one-off payment to purchase essential items such as beds or clothing
- where carers may face extra costs because the child has specific extra needs, for example a medical condition.

In general, FSSW 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 successful in the long-term. Carers will be expected to 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

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 Fostering Services Regulations where the child has been placed in an emergency.

### **7.3 Residence Order Allowance**

Camden may make on-going payments to carers who have a Residence 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 Residence 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
- contribute towards the legal costs of a special guardian, if the child was previously looked after
- 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 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 FSSW 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.

## **7.6 Accommodation**

FSSW 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.

## **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 FSSW 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 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.

## 8 Complaints

At Camden Children, Schools and Families we aim 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 fostering 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 parent 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 complaints and representations team in the Children, Schools and Families Directorate. This team can be contacted on 0207 974 6666.

## Contact us

If you want to talk to someone about family and friends care arrangements and you live in....

***Hampstead, Gospel Oak, West Hampstead, Swiss Cottage, Highgate or Kilburn...***

Contact the duty and assessment team at:

FSSW North  
42 Caversham Road  
London  
NW5 2DR  
Tele: 020 7974 6600

***Kentish Town, Chalk Farm, Camden Town, Regents Park, Somers Town or Holborn...***

Contact the duty and assessment team at:

FSSW South  
Crowndale Centre  
218 Eversholt Street  
London  
NW1 1BD  
Tele: 020 7974 4094