

Reunification Process Policy and Guidance

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1 Introduction and Context

Returning home to a parent or other relative is the most common outcome for children who are in care - 34% of all children who ceased to be looked after in 2013-14 returned home (Department for Education 2014).

However, research has shown that many returns home breakdown and children can experience further maltreatment which results with the children subsequently being taken back into care.

Research indicates a range of factors which contribute to these high rates of reunification breakdown including: lack of (or poor quality) assessments; passive case management; a lack of appropriate services and support for children and parents; and inadequate planning and preparation for return home and monitoring post return (Farmer and Parker 1991; Biehal 2006; Farmer 2009; Farmer et al 2011; Wade et al 2011; Farmer and Lutman 2012; Thoburn et al 2012; Farmer and Wijedasa 2013 and Farmer 2014).

Calderdale Council reunification framework has been developed based upon the principles of the NSPCC reunification - an evidenced, informed framework for return home (2015).

The NSPCC framework includes consideration to assessment; analysis of risk and protective factors; analysis of parental capacity to sustain change; decision making; planning; and support for reunification. When considering whether reunification is a possibility for the child, social work practitioners should refer to the Reunification Policy and Guidance document which also contains some appendix documents to assist with reunification planning.

It is critical that assessment of the risk and protective factors and analysis of parental capacity to sustain changes are seen as continuous live activities throughout the entire process.

Reunification of a child or young person should be considered at the earliest stage possible and the guidance highlights that at the completion of Care Proceedings, if the final care plan for a child is not to return home, the Final Care Plan filed to Court should clearly outline what the Local Authority would expect to see with regards to progress from parent/parents to enable the Local Authority to commence a reunification assessment.

All Children and Young People who have Children Looked After Reviews will be provided with a categorisation at their Looked After Review in respect to where in the reunification process they are considered to be. The NSPCC model adopts a traffic light system and Calderdale Council will adopt a similar process. The below categorisations will be considered within each child's Review, and these will continue to be reviewed within Permanency Planning Meetings, Social Work Supervision and Looked After Reviews :

Green: The risk has significantly reduced and reunification assessment should start as soon as possible.

Amber: Parent/parents are working with the Local Authority but there is still a significant level of risk that would need to be addressed and it is believed that with a reunification plan of work there is the possibility that an assessment could commence. The process will follow the principles of the Pre-Proceedings Stage of the Public Law Outline. A letter will be sent to parents, outlining the next steps with regards to the reunification process. A Permanence Planning Meeting will then take place where parents, foster carers and professionals will be invited and a reunification plan of work will be agreed.

An agreement will be signed at the end of this meeting by parents, the allocated Social Worker and the child where appropriate, and parents should be clear regarding what the expectation of the Local Authority is with regards to reducing risk and working with specific agencies. This agreement/plan will be reviewed over an 8 week period and if at that point progress has been made and risk reduced, a reunification assessment will take place.

Red: The risk is likely to be unchangeable and it is unlikely that reunification will be possible. Examples of this might be none accidental injuries or carers with significant learning difficulties who are unable to parent safely.

There should be a Permanence Planning Meeting for every child and young person prior to their Children Looked After Review, and all professionals within this Review (including the IRO) will discuss and explore the categories. These discussions will feed into the social work report for the Children Looked After Review and a recommendation should be made by the Social Worker.

Once the categorisation is decided within a Review, Permanence Planning Meetings will continue to take place and this will be reviewed (please follow the attached flowchart which outlines the actions that follow based on the agreed categorisation). It is possible to change the categorisation between Reviews, however this must be agreed within a Permanence Planning Meeting and the IRO must be in agreement.

It is recognised that preparation and support is key in the success of reunification. Once an updated Single Assessment is completed (Reunification Assessment), the professionals would come together to form a transition plan. The assessment should focus upon how this should happen, what the parental goals are, and the support and services that are needed to support the family to sustain the changes that will make it safe for the child to live at home. The goals, support and services will be identified through the assessment (both in the early stages and when planning the reunification).

Social Workers should exercise professional judgement in relation to timescales when looking at sustained parental change.

2 Principles

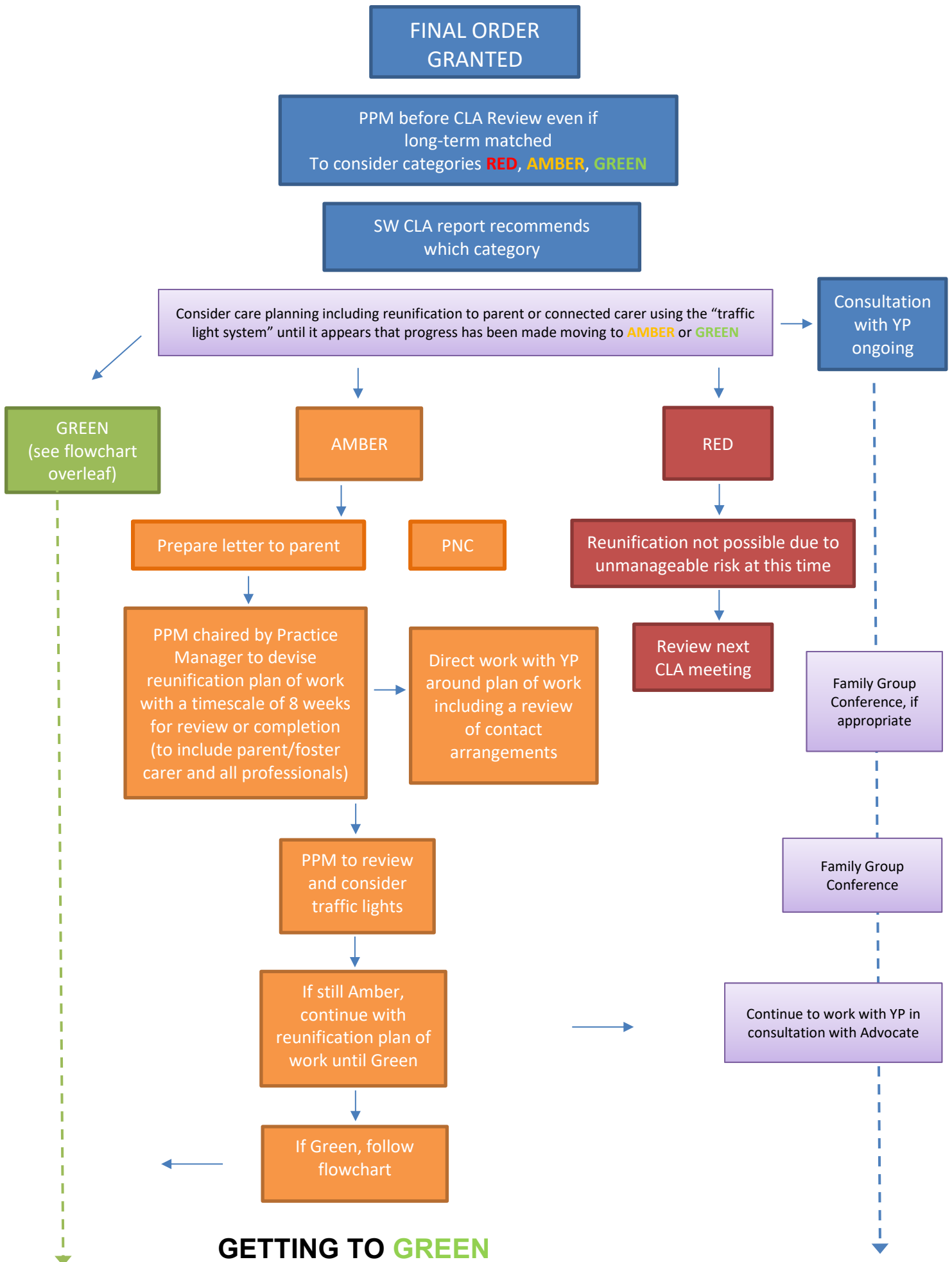
- Child at the centre – The child's best interests must be at the centre of decision making. The situation must be viewed from the child's perspective by listening to them, observing them and interpreting their behaviour;

- Child centred timescales – Having child centred timescales means balancing the time needed for robust assessments and gradual return home with children’s timeframes and their need for stability and permanence. This also includes working around important events in their lives, such as starting school terms or sitting exams. Thinking about return home needs to begin from the start of the child’s entry to care;
- Respectful engagement with families – Parents should be given reasonable opportunity and support to make the changes they need to make, whilst ensuring the child’s best interests are kept central to decision making. Social Workers should work collaboratively with parents, help them to understand the changes needed, build on their strengths, show sensitivity, offer practice support, explain the consequences of breaching agreements and break ‘bad’ news where necessary (Farmer et al 2011 and Child Welfare Information Gateway 2012);
- Understanding diversity – Engaging, assessing and supporting families should be sensitive to culture, religion, disability, sexuality and gender. Workers should be aware of disproportionality and any potential bias in making decisions and delivering support to families with particular characteristics. Collaborative working, critical reflection, use of research evidence and case supervision should be used to mitigate such biases;
- The importance of support for parents and children before and after return home – Social Workers must be aware of the importance of relationship based social work support, combined with specialist services and support from family, friends and the community. This will involve the use of Family Group Conferences;
- Structured professional judgement and best practice in social work – the work is based on core social work skills, structured professional judgement (workers and managers) within a structured and evidence based framework;
- Collaborative working and avoiding bias – Evidence from serious case reviews and research points to the need for objectivity in assessments and ways to mitigate a range of common biases including optimism and confirmation bias (Munro 1999, Turney et al 2011, and Farmer ad Lutman 2012). For this reason, the framework

promotes co-working where one worker who does not meet the family develops an in depth analytical chronology, whilst the (usually) case holding Social Worker carries out the assessment of the parents and child/ren. Decisions about whether or not the child should return home are made collaboratively at a minimum between these 2 workers, managers and other relevant practitioners;

- The crucial role of the Team Manager in case supervision – The role of the Team Manager is crucial in ensuring that children and families are receiving evidence informed practice that places the child at the centre, and in ensuring that workers are able to give children and families the time needed to undertake the work. The Team Manager must familiarise themselves with the framework to support staff to work within in.

Reunification of a child subject to a Final Order



GREEN FLOWCHART

