

Contact

Contact meetings form an essential part of the parenting assessment and are fully supervised and supported. Based on research by Humphries & Kiraly (2009) the programme offers parents twice weekly contact for periods of 2-3 hours duration. This means that parents are available to engage in intensive work with the Home on Time team on two further occasions during the week when their child is not present.

Carers and parents meet frequently and have the opportunity to develop a relationship which may provide reassurance for the parent if the plan becomes adoption. In these circumstances, the adopters will have developed an understanding of the child's background which will assist them in bringing the child up with knowledge of their history and birth parent/s. Post adoption contact is also more likely to occur and to be more meaningful since the birth and adoptive parents have already developed a relationship.

Where a return to birth family is likely, contact becomes more intensive and in the final stages (for those infants who return home) it takes place in the home of the parent or family member.

Support throughout the concurrent care process

Social work support is essential for everyone involved in a concurrent care placement given the stresses of the process. Both the birth family and the carers will be supported by the Home on Time team and the carers will also be supported by their adoption/family placement social worker. The significant investment of time and resources dedicated to each case within the programme is an indicator that the Home on Time team is fully committed to achieving rehabilitation if this is possible.

Where a child is returned to their parent(s) or other relative, the concurrent carers face the prospect of losing a child to whom they will have become attached and will require additional support. These situations will be very stressful for the carers, but it is hoped that they will be able to remain focused on the child's needs and cooperate fully with the rehabilitation programme.

REFERENCES

Brown R and Ward H, *Decision making within a Child's Timeframe*, Loughborough: Childhood Well-being Research Centre, Loughborough University, 2013

Humphreys C and Kiraly M, *Baby on Board: Report of the Infants in Care and Family Contact Research Project*, Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 2009

Monck E, Reynolds J and Wigfall V, *The Role of Concurrent Planning: Making permanent placements for young children*, London: BAAF, 2003



HOME ON TIME

Placing children through concurrent care

Information for Professionals

Background and Funding

Home on Time is a regional concurrent care programme that was implemented across each of the five Health and Social Care Trusts in 2015. The programme is funded by the Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP) which seeks to transform mainstream children's services and break the intergenerational cycle of poor outcomes that some children and families experience in NI. EITP also aims to embed early intervention approaches in order to deliver sustained improvements in outcomes for children that will continue beyond the lifespan of the programme.

Financial support provided by the fund has enabled each Trust to recruit a dedicated Senior Social Work Practitioner for Home on Time to undertake intensive assessments with parents and a part time Family Support Worker to assist with contact arrangements and parenting skills.

Home on Time relies on concurrent planning as an approach to achieving permanent placements for vulnerable children, usually aged 0-24 months. It places infants, who are usually the subject of care proceedings, with carers who are dually approved as foster carers and adopters, so that whatever the outcome of proceedings (adoption or rehabilitation) these children do not have to experience unnecessary moves and broken attachments.

The Concurrent Planning Process

Concurrent planning focuses on vulnerable infants where there is a high probability that return to their birth parents or extended family will not be possible given the parents' previous history. The parents may already have a child in care or previously adopted without their consent but a further period of assessment is considered necessary before the Trust and ultimately, courts can come to a final decision.

Parents are actively supported to make best use of this last opportunity to demonstrate that they can care for their child safely. They benefit from intensive support from the Home on Time team to help them in addressing often entrenched difficulties and in making the changes necessary.

Work with parents is transparent, they are helped to understand what is expected of them and the work they will be required to undertake. They are also fully informed that their child may not return to their care and may be adopted by their carers.

The ultimate aim of concurrent care is to achieve the return of the child, where possible, and to avoid the considerable delays and frequent change of foster placements commonly experienced by these children.

Home on Time aims to reduce the time taken for decisions about the child's permanent care to be made and to reduce the time it takes for the final permanence outcome to be achieved (either adoption or return to birth family).

Concurrent Carers

The Home on Time process involves the recruitment of foster carers who are also approved as adopters. They are required to foster a child in the first instance, and to support the child's return to the birth parent, with the possibility that the fostering arrangement will lead to adoption. Carers are carefully selected for this challenging role. They receive specialist training and are assessed and supported by experienced family placement social workers. Carers work closely with the child's parents and the Home on Time team, passing on essential information about the child's progress and development.

Applicants who are approved as Home on Time concurrent carers are child centred, seeing their task as ensuring that these children have the best possible start in life and the best opportunity for permanence. They knowingly accept the risk that the child may return to birth family members. Concurrent carers also know that these infants have a higher risk of developmental uncertainty as a result of their genetic vulnerability and the parents' life style during pregnancy. Concurrent carers recruited to Home on Time are required to:

- Transport the child themselves to and from contact with the parent
- Ensure at least one carer is at home full-time with the child during the placement
- Spend time with the parent both at the beginning and end of contact sessions, to facilitate a smooth transition
- Be willing to build a positive and respectful relationship with the child's parents
- Be prepared to actively support the transfer of the child's care back to his/her parent(s) or relatives should the Trust and/or court decide it is safe to do so.

Wherever possible, children are placed with foster carers who share their ethnicity and their religious and cultural background. Consideration is also given to the geographic location of the carers' home in relation to the child's family to minimise the risk of unplanned contact occurring.

The Evidence Base for Concurrent Planning

An extensive body of research indicates conclusively that the early environment, and the first three years of life in particular, play a major role in shaping children's cognitive, social-economic and behavioural development. For further information see Brown and Ward, 2013.

A study by Monck et al, (2004) examined the outcomes of concurrent planning compared to traditional adoptions and found that there were substantial advantages for the infants placed.

The key referral criteria to Home on Time is that there is a high likelihood the child will be placed for adoption.

Many parents referred to Home on Time:

1. Are already known to Health and Social Care Trusts and may have older children who are looked after or have been adopted.
2. Have significant difficulties which have lead Trust staff to conclude that their child would not be safe in their care.

In particular Home on Time may be considered in those cases where:

1. The supervision provided within a residential parenting assessment or parent and child foster care placement is assessed as being insufficient or where this has already been tried.
2. Based on their past history, the probability of the child's return home is already weighted against the birth family.

Legal Status

Given the high level of concern in relation to parents referred to the programme and the significance of avoiding delay for vulnerable infants, a Care Order application will be made in respect of the child. This ensures the continued scrutiny of the Court in these complex cases whether the care plan becomes one of adoption or of rehabilitation and ensures there is legal security and stability for the child.