Improving contact in the best interest of the child: Issues Paper

Summary of the co-design process and our discoveries

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# Contact Principles:

The project was initially known as the Common Contact Framework project, and is a component of the Safe Home for Life (SHFL) reform which has worked in partnership with The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI) and the Institute of Child Protection Studies (ICPS) kContact research team for the development and implementation of a consistent approach across the service system for children and young people in out-of-home care (OOHC) experiencing contact with their families.

Through consultation, it was discovered that a common ‘Framework’ was not as useful as common principles that could be applied in any context, in a flexible way. The concern was to ensure that principles are not set out as strict guidelines, as we know that decreased flexibility can work against good practice by encouraging adherence to process, rather than well thought out and planned practice.

The Contact Principles project has taken into account evidence based best practice, including research currently being undertaken by the ICPS and the implementation of key principles to support practice that focuses on collaborative case planning, consistency in decision-making practices, record keeping and case reviews across the sector.

| Term  | Definition |
| --- | --- |
| CFDU | **Child Family District Unit** |
| CLC | Community Legal Centre |
| CMT | Case Management Transfer |
| FACS | Department of Family and Community Services |
| ICPS | Institute of Child Protection Studies |
| NGO | Non-Government Organisation |
| OOHC | Out-Of-Home Care |
| OSP | Office of the Senior Practitioner |
| SHFL | Safe Home for Life |
| TACSI | The Australian Centre for Social Innovation |
| WLC | Women’s Legal Centre |

# How we can improve contact in the best interest of the child:

## 2.1 The rationale for the project

When children have been removed from their parents and taken into the care of the state, they will, in most cases still have ‘contact’ with that parent(s) – short periods of time when they meet their parents, most often face to face contact whether unsupervised or supervised. Contact is a series of experiences that are crucial to shaping the nature of relationships between children and their birth parents and family – whether the children are to returning to their parents’ care (restoration), guardianship or are to be adopted (non-Aboriginal children). Positive contact experiences have significant impact on children’s self perception and how they make sense of their world.

Contact that works for children has the potential to return more children home, where restoration is the goal, or lead to more stable placements. Poor contact can compromise parents/family, and the effort they often present to caseworkers and carers. There is little research on what defines good contact and a number of seemingly contradictory views on this point held by FACS and NGO partners.

## 2.2 Project Approach

The scope of this project was to develop a clear perspective on the principles of good contact and identify ways to turn those principles into practice. The Australian Centre for Social Innovation (TACSI), worked with FACS and NGO partners in Western Sydney, Nepean Blue Mountains and Southern districts to determine 5 challenges of contact, 6 principles that define good contact and 9 different ways to bring those principles to life across child protection in NSW.

TACSI’s approach is one that recognises the value of lived experience alongside professional knowledge. We started the project with some ‘rigorous hanging out’ with children, parents, carers, workers and managers who were part of contact to get their experience – we used qualitative research methods like semi-structured interviews, service shadowing, card sorting and rapid ethnography, also called *focussed ethnography* and *design ethnography* to understand the experience and complexity of planning for and participating in contact. We ran two workshops with the sector to make sense of what we learnt, to shape the principles and define projects to bring the principles alive.

The team consisted of service design expertise and insight expertise from TACSI, and a number of FACS Western Sydney and Nepean Blue Mountains districts staff who had been trained in contextual research.

Researchers form the Institute of Child Protection Studies, Australian Catholic University and University of Melbourne are conducting the study: kContact – keeping contact between parents and children in care’ provided the literature review.

## 2.3 The Workshops

We carried out qualitative research with a total of 18 children, parents and carers, as well as research with a total of 21 professionals across 3 districts. 12 organisations and 88 workers, managers, directors, policy professionals, peak body representatives, legal professionals and the President of the Children’s Court through workshops that helped make sense of the research, from their perspective, and define projects. Nearly everyone we met agreed contact could be improved.

## 2.4 The Challenges of contact

All in all we heard, saw and identified 5 main challenges of contact

1. The logistical challenge
2. The therapeutic challenge
3. The normality challenge
4. The communication challenge
5. The legal challenge

## 2.5 Contact Principles

The 6 common underlying principles for contact shown here were shaped through 2 workshops with the sector. The purpose of the first workshop was to build a shared understanding about contact across the sector. At this workshops we shared and built on the findings from our qualitative research and the literature review by the kContact project. The purpose of the second workshop was to work with the sector to define a set of principles grounded in our insights from the first workshop and identify ways to put them into practice. The 6 principles are:

1. Put purpose first
2. Plan with and fit to routine
3. Set and manage expectations
4. Show respect, build trust
5. Support children, parents, carers and workers
6. Review and improve

# Making common principles common practice:

## 3.1 Transforming practice

Contact that is in the best interests of the child requires contact *principles* to be different, and will require investment in projects to create and embed that best practice. Principles alone are unlikely to change practice; they are only valuable in so much that they inform the development of that practice. At the second workshop, we worked to develop a number of ideas for projects that could help shift contact practice in line with our new contact principles.

* The project should involve contextual user research to better understand the exact context in which these solutions need to work
* The solutions themselves should be developed through a number of phases of prototyping, paper prototyping, a small experience prototype and a carefully measured demonstration project before going to scale
* The means of taking to scale (implementation) should also be subject to prototyping – not just the intervention itself
* The ideas should be informed by thinking outside of the context of child protection
* They should be designed and documented at the level of people interaction, so that they can be repeated
* This should be completed by a multi-disciplinary team that has expertise in design, child protection and business.

# Mapping of contact principles and practice standards:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Practice Standard** | **Expectation** | **Contact principle** |
| Practice leadership |  |  |
| Relationship based practice | Commit to purposeful, regular contactEngage in honest, respectful interactions and discussions with the child or young person and their family from the very first meetingCommunicate in a clear, honest and respectful way about the purpose of our involvement, safety and risk concerns, what the bottom lines are and why, what needs to change and how that may occur, implications for any actions or lack of action, their rights and our responsibility to help them | Put purpose firstShow respect, build trustSet and manage expectationsPlan with and fit to routineSupport children, parents, carers and workers |
| Holistic assessment and family work |  | Put purpose first |
| Collaboration | Actively engage the child, young person, family and their network to participate in planning, actions, reviews and decision making | Plan with and fit to routine |
| Critical reflection | Reflect on your practice in specific cases to enhance your practice more broadly | Review and improve |
| Working with Aboriginal communities | Actively engage the child, young person, family and their network to participate in planning, actions, reviews and decision making | Show respect, build trustPlan with and fit to routineSupport children, parents, carers and workers |
| Culturally responsive practice with diverse communities | Actively engage the child, young person, family and their network to participate in planning, actions, reviews and decision making | Show respect, build trustPlan with and fit to routineSupport children, parents, carers and workers |
| Practice expertise |  | Review and improve |
| Sharing risk |  | Put purpose first |
| Documentation in casework |  | Put purpose firstReview and improve |

# Current state:

In July 2016 collaboration with the Office of the Senior Practitioner (OSP) determined that the integration of the key principles into the current OSP simplification project work would be the most relevant approach to applying the key principles into FACS practice. The integrated framework for practice currently being developed by the OSP will also contain contact related content which acknowledges the important role that contact has within the spectrum of OOHC related casework.

# Related Documents:

**Care and Protection Practice Standards.** Office of the Senior Practitioner, NSW Department of Family and Community Services.

**How can we improve contact in the best interest of the child? Challenges, principles and recommendations.** The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, August 2015.

**Projects to improve contact in the best interests of the child: A proposal for Family and Community Services, NSW.** The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, September 2015.

**Making common principles common practice.** The Australian Centre for Social Innovation.

**Mapping of contact framework to practice standards.** The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, July 2016.