

Supervision and Assessment of Foster Carers and Prospective Foster Carer Households

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The public health measures set out by the Government are intended to minimise the risk to people of being infected by Covid-19/coronavirus, and the risk to the population at large. The key measure is to limit face-to-face contact between people, and this will escalate to self-isolation when an individual has symptoms of or is recovering from Covid-19. Each member of a foster carer household (or a prospective foster carer household), and those with whom they have contact must be kept safe through following public health advice.

Alongside this, it is important for fostering services to maintain their recruitment and approval responsibilities during this pandemic, and their duties to continue to support foster carers. In every foster care placement, there must be an explicit identification of any risk factors that result from the pandemic, with an agreed and explicit support plan to ensure that the safety, welfare and needs of both the foster carers and the child are met.

In “normal” times, the typical arrangements for addressing these issues would be face-to-face meetings, involving assessing or supervising social workers with (prospective) foster carers in their home or other venues. The pandemic has made these arrangements “high risk”, with a need to find alternative and workable approaches – particularly the use of online resources or meetings that have become possible as the lockdown protocols have changed. Fostering services have a duty as employers to ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place to undertake this work, and to communicate clearly to employees their expectations around safe working practices. They might usefully follow the guidance set out by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) about working safely in other people’s homes during the pandemic (last updated 7 August 2020): www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/homes.

The Government guidance aims to provide ‘a practical framework to think about what you need to do to continue, or restart, operations during the Covid-19 pandemic’, and ‘is designed to be relevant for people who provide services in, and to, people’s homes’. Central to this advice is the requirement to carry out a risk assessment in line with the employer’s legal responsibility to protect workers and others, before taking action to minimise risks wherever possible. In setting out how best to undertake supervisory and assessment visits to foster carer and prospective foster households, fostering services may wish to consider the following issues:

- It is generally accepted that much assessment and support can be adequately undertaken virtually, using a range of technological solutions such as video or telephone. This should be encouraged and promoted wherever possible. It is widely accepted that telephone interviews are less effective than other methods where people can “see” each other through video. Where these options are used, there should always be an explicit identification of any matters that have not been adequately addressed.
- A face-to-face visit may become essential in certain circumstances – where a placement may be at risk of disrupting, or where there are safeguarding issues or

significant concerns about the child's welfare, or where the child is moving to a new placement.

- Most fostering services have concluded that it is not safe to complete a full fostering assessment without face-to-face discussions or visits to the foster carer's home. This means that they require one or more face-to-face visits to have taken place before the assessment can be completed. Each fostering service will need an explicit and agreed policy on this matter. The same is true in respect of home safety checks, where some services have felt that a virtual visit to the premises is sufficient, but others have required this to be done in person.
- Where social workers have identified Covid-19 risk factors with regards to the foster carer, or where there is another person living in their household who is subject to these risk factors, this must be taken into consideration. This will need to be considered on a case-by-case basis. Where social workers are self-isolating, then by definition they cannot undertake visits.
- Individual risk assessments should be conducted prior to any face-to-face visit, and if a foster carer or prospective foster carer has Covid-19 symptoms or is self-isolating, then a visit will likely not be identified as safe. In those circumstances, a plan of action will be needed according to the specifics of the situation. The requirement to contact foster carers prior to visiting raises questions about whether it is possible to undertake unannounced visits, as required in the legislation. Some fostering services have undertaken these virtually; others have decided that this is not practicable.
- If face-to-face visits are identified as essential, then every effort should be made to comply with social distancing and mitigation guidelines. In practice, that will mean people sitting apart from each other, and consideration might usefully be given as to whether the meeting can take place in the garden or an outside space. Social workers should try to avoid touching door handles and the like, and hand washing measures should be in place immediately before and following the visit.
- Government advice is that: 'Workplaces should not encourage the precautionary use of extra PPE to protect against Covid-19 outside clinical settings or when responding to a suspected or confirmed case of Covid-19'.
- There is increasing evidence that black and minority ethnic individuals are more vulnerable to Covid-19, although the reasons for this are not yet robustly identified.¹ It is essential that, in fulfilling the duties and responsibilities of fostering services, the protocols that ensure equalities and anti-discriminatory policy and practice are fully complied with.

In identifying the key issues and possible solutions above, it is also necessary to recognise that there is no one, ready-made solution to any of this at a time of considerable uncertainty. At the same time, the values, commitment, expertise and sensitivity of the fostering sector is well placed to identify individual and family-by-family solutions. As the pandemic issues

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-review-of-disparities-in-risks-and-outcomes>

evolve, these qualities need to drive the identification of new solutions, drawing on the longstanding skills and experience of the sector.