

Kinship and Covid-19: Supporting children and carers in forming new family arrangements

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The public health measures set out by the Government are intended to minimise the spread of Covid-19 (coronavirus). All of us (including kinship households) and those with whom we have contact must be kept safe. Covid-19 is a significant health risk for people over 70 and those with existing health conditions. Kinship households are often intergenerational and many involve grandparents caring for grandchildren. Whilst risk is often focused on our physical health, the psychological impact of living through this crisis is also significant. Many people are affected by heightened anxiety. Households are struggling to balance the differing needs of family members.

When a child comes into care or where a kinship placement is proposed, this almost certainly indicates a serious crisis in their family and, in turn, a serious crisis for them. When a local authority is considering or has decided to issue care proceedings, then it will need to consider in a timely way with whom the child should be placed. Placement with family members or connected persons is a priority as set out in law (see 22C(6) of the Children Act 1989). Removing a child from their birth parents or carers is unlikely to be considered as optional, but rather to be necessary to the child's safety, welfare and development. As such, this work is considered as a lifesaving and life-enabling intervention for children by the state. This is accounted for in the public health measures and regulations, which contain specific exemptions to allow social work practice with children and on behalf of children to continue.

The *Initial Assessments of Family and Friends Carers during the CV-19 pandemic* (https://www.frg.org.uk/images/Viability_Assessments/initial-family-and-friends-care-assessment-a-good-practice-guide.pdf) has been developed to assist practitioners in these unique circumstances to produce a robust and balanced assessment. It should be read as an appendix to the earlier document, *Initial Family and Friends Care Assessment: A good practice guide* (https://www.frg.org.uk/images/Viability_Assessments/VIABILITY-MASTER-COPY-WHOLE-GUIDE.pdf). The guidance sets out key principles to ensure work is appropriately child- and family-centred. These principles apply equally to the work involved in supporting children and carers in forming new kinship family arrangements and when children are being moved to live with carers.

The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (All Tiers) (England) Regulations 2020

These regulations came into force on 2 December 2020 and continue until midnight on 2 February 2021. They apply to England only. All previous English health protection regulations are revoked, save for transitional provisions. The regulations specifically allow in *all* tiers gatherings that are 'reasonably necessary (d) for the purposes of placing children, or facilitating children being placed, in the care of another person by social services, whether on a temporary or permanent basis'.

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It remains the case that any decision around moving children needs to consider the health risks to the child and the carers, and to any other members of the household. Carers should

not normally take on the care of a child if they, or another member of their household, are defined as being in a vulnerable group. If it is possible to avoid exposing vulnerable people to increased risk of transmission, then that should be the position. Risks to others in the household also need to have been addressed.

When planning introductory visits, account will need to be taken of whether the parties have been observing social distancing advice in their day-to-day life, and the localised context (i.e. rates of transmission locally and any local restrictions). This will be a crucial aspect in decision-making. Risks will need to be mitigated as fully as possible in all circumstances.

The news that a Covid-19 vaccine has been approved and will be rolled out over the next 12 months to the entire population is significant. Those who are classed as “vulnerable” will be prioritised, and this may include some kinship carers. This development should be taken into account by practitioners. The practitioner’s role is to support those involved to consider all the factors involved, how any challenges could be mitigated, and what support would be required to do so. Support may involve advocating for or supporting kinship carers to access the vaccine. Introducing children to households where there are vulnerable members should be delayed where this is possible.

Family members, including grandparents, may not be in a position to take on the care of the child immediately because of Covid-19 or other health-related risks. It should not mean that the child is excluded from this option altogether. Instead, discussions should take place to identify possible solutions that may resolve this, including ensuring that contact is meaningfully maintained and that a fully informed risk assessment is completed

We would encourage the sector to think proactively and creatively about how they can support children and carers in forming new family arrangements that minimise the risk to health. Children flourish when arrangements are made with trusted adults, and when their views and feelings are at the forefront of decision making.

Many factors have to be considered within a balanced and detailed risk assessment when making such arrangements, taking into account the risks associated with Covid-19 to the households involved. These need to be subject to review if and when circumstances change.

CoramBAAF has produced a summary of the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (All Tiers) England Regulations 2020 that can be found [here](#). The regulations can be found here: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2020/1200/contents> and the guidance is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/local-restriction-tiers-what-you-need-to-know>.