

Making Arrangements for Contact for Children in Care

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When considering contact issues, the safety, health and welfare of children, their carers and birth parents must always be the overriding priority, and the local authority must agree a plan that recognises this. The severe risks associated with Covid-19/coronavirus have resulted in significant restrictions being placed on any form of social contact. This includes setting out a very limited set of circumstances where adults or children can leave their home. As a result, any form of direct contact involving a child in foster care, wherever this usually takes place, must stop. Suspending contact arrangements is likely to be distressing for both birth parents and the child, but the parent/s have a primary responsibility to ensure that their child is kept safe and that the Government's Covid-19 requirements are complied with.

Suspending contact may contravene any legal order that is in place that requires contact to be arranged. If there are specific questions about the lawful interpretation of contact arrangements or orders or other agreed arrangements, a local authority lawyer should be consulted.

For some children in some placements, online communication could be helpful as a temporary alternative, and for some it may already be actively and positively in use. Where it is a new option, there should be an assessment of any risk factors that might arise, including the accessing of information that identifies online details of the child's location.

Every child must have an opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings about these issues in a supportive and open way. This will need to reflect their specific circumstances, age and level of understanding. It should be noted that for some children, the degree of stress that they may be experiencing may be significant.

If the child is looked after under section 20, the parent/s has the right to remove the child without notice. However, the risks associated with Covid-19 infection are such that the parent/s should not be permitted to act in a way that creates further risks to the health of their child, or the health of other individuals. The local authority has a duty to prioritise these matters and practice should reflect these fundamental principles.