

Supervisory and Assessment Visits by Social Workers to Foster Carer Households

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The public health measures set out by the Government are intended to reduce the risk to every citizen of being infected by Covid-19/coronavirus and to the population at large. The key measure is to severely restrict face-to-face contact between people other than those who live in the same household. This will escalate to self-isolation when an individual has symptoms of or is recovering from the virus. There are limited exceptions to this when it comes to key workers travelling to work, families needing to shop for essential items and daily exercise once a day, where this involves leaving home but includes ensuring at least two metres of distance from others apart from members of the same household.

Every one of these issues applies to foster care and every member of the foster carer household must be kept safe through following these public health measures. At the same time, foster carers have duties and responsibilities towards the children whom they care for and to a wider group of others – their fostering service, the child’s local authority, the child’s school, health services, and the child’s birth family. They will be directly supported by the child’s social worker and supervised by their supervising social worker. These arrangements must continue as priority issues in ensuring that the safety, welfare, needs and stability of the child, the carers themselves and others are protected.

The challenge is in bringing the two issues together – complying with the Covid-19 health requirements and then having access to key people for discussion, problem-solving, learning, and support. The typical arrangements for these objectives would be face-to-face meetings in the foster carer’s home or in outside venues, and these are now largely prohibited. For every foster carer, there will need to be an explicit agreed plan to manage these issues. There is no one solution to any of this, but there will need to be a workable and working solution. In many instances, this may include virtual meetings using the range of other options from the online world that have become familiar. Where online solutions are not possible, for whatever reason, a telephone call remains a potentially viable option. But there will also be the arrangements for children to be taken to school as one of the defined “vulnerable groups” eligible for such arrangements.

A face-to-face visit may be deemed essential in certain circumstances – where a placement may be at risk of disrupting, where safeguarding issues need to be discussed, or where the child is moving to a new placement. Before agreeing to such a visit, it will be necessary to assess the risk, taking into account the purpose of the visit, any specific vulnerabilities within the fostering household, the wishes and feelings of the foster carers and other adults in the household, and the wishes and feelings of any children in the household, according to their age and understanding.

If a visit is agreed, then those participating must adhere to social distancing principles and to other health measures such as hand-washing and the use of hand sanitiser, as set out by the Government and Public Health England. Social distancing may be difficult to adhere to when children are involved.

It is important for fostering services to maintain their recruitment and approval duties and responsibilities during this crisis, especially if some foster carers in vulnerable groups are no longer able to maintain their fostering placements. In most cases, assessment visits can be undertaken virtually, and technology could be used to complete a virtual tour of the house and a home safety check.