

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. Currently, this means that there is a national ‘lockdown’ in England. During this time, it is important for fostering services to maintain their recruitment and approval responsibilities, and to meet their duties to support foster carers.

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 meant that in some circumstances these arrangements will be “high risk”, with a need to find alternative and workable approaches – particularly the use of technology.

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. Central to this 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:

- Much assessment and support can be adequately undertaken or provided virtually, using a range of technological solutions such as video or telephone. This should be encouraged and promoted where appropriate. 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 some face-to-face discussions and visits to the foster carer’s home. This means that they require one or more face-to-face visits to have taken place before an 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 other guidelines. In practice, that will mean people sitting apart from each other, and potentially wearing masks. 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.

In identifying the key issues and possible solutions, it is important to recognise that there is no one, ready-made solution to any of this at a time of considerable uncertainty. The fostering sector will need to identify individual and family-by-family solutions in the context of an often changing local context.