

Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for local authorities on children's social care

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This guidance is for local authorities, those who have corporate parenting responsibilities, and local safeguarding partnerships who work together to safeguard and promote the welfare of all children in their area. It will also be of interest to social workers, residential care providers and staff, and those with safeguarding responsibilities.

Everyone involved in promoting the welfare, protection and care of children and young people is working extremely hard in the face of unprecedented challenges to support the most vulnerable during this period. It is a time of severe pressure across society, which we know will present heightened levels of risk for some children and young people, so it is especially important that these children and young people continue to receive the services and support they need. At the same time, we recognise that the challenging context means that local authorities and partners will struggle to meet the full range of statutory duties relating to child protection, safeguarding and care at present.

This guidance should be used to support local authorities in determining how best to support families and protect vulnerable children in this context. It is underpinned by a set of principles which should inform local decision-making and day to day practice with children and families. It also recognises the approach that many local authorities are already taking.

It should be read alongside other coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance, including:

- [guidance for schools about temporarily closing](#)
- [coronavirus \(COVID-19\) guidance on vulnerable children and young people](#)
- [information for social workers from Social Work England](#)

Principles

Local authorities and local safeguarding partners have specific duties under legislation and statutory guidance concerning support for families and the welfare and protection of children. We know that local authorities and local safeguarding partners will want to continue to meet their statutory duties as far as they can, but there will be times in the current circumstances when this is not possible.

At these times we want local authorities and local safeguarding partners to feel empowered to support families and protect children to the best of their abilities given the challenging context.

These difficult and complex decisions should be made in the spirit of the following principles:

- child-centred - promoting children's best interests
- risk-based - prioritising support and resources for children at greatest risk
- family focussed - harnessing the strengths in families and their communities
- evidence informed - ensuring decisions are proportionate and justified
- collaborative - working in partnership with parents and other professionals
- transparent - providing clarity and maintaining professional curiosity about a child's wellbeing

Many authorities have told us their children's social care services are risk-assessing and then reviewing the circumstances of every family they are currently working with, ensuring that those facing the highest risks are visited the most frequently.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is causing great social and economic upheaval and the social circumstances of many families are changing. Given this, there is an expectation that all authorities will have similar arrangements in place which ensure proper scrutiny of the safety and well-being of children.

Supporting the workforce

The need to divert from established practice whilst prioritising vulnerable children will be an additional challenge for a social care and partner workforce already working under significant pressure as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19).

Local leaders, their social care workforce, partners and the wider children's workforce understand the needs of the children and young people in their area and have the skills and knowledge to make decisions in their best interests.

We expect that local authorities will have arrangements in place to ensure sufficient management oversight of practice on a day to day basis. Where authorities need to deviate

from standard practice and statutory requirements, we expect that they will keep clear records to capture the rationale and risk assessment for that.

Social Work England have published [information for social workers](#) which should be read alongside this guidance.

Government is working to provide as much support as possible to local government at this time. This includes £1.6 billion of funding that has been announced for local authorities to meet extra demand and costs arising from coronavirus (COVID-19), including costs in children's social care. The government has also designated social workers and other social care workers as [critical workers](#). This means that their children are eligible for an education or childcare place despite settings being closed to most children. The Secretary of State for Education has also agreed with Ofsted that it will suspend routine inspections of children's social care services. We are exploring ways in which we could go further to reduce burdens and requirements, and are in close discussion with sector representatives on the most effective way to do this.

The Department for Education (DfE) will continue to support local authorities through the use of advisers and commissioners and will maintain regular contact with authorities through regional teams. To streamline our contact with local authorities and reduce burdens, we have taken steps to bring together DfE teams that have regular contact with local authorities to share information and coordinate communication.

Children's social care

How should local authorities prioritise activity under the current pressure?

As set out earlier in this guidance, we accept that local authorities will struggle to meet some of their statutory duties at the moment.

Local authorities know the needs of their local children and families best, and we expect that they will make sensible, risk-based judgements about where to focus their activity. The principles set out above should guide local decision making in these circumstances.

Should social workers change how they visit children and families?

We expect local authorities and social workers to make judgements about visiting which balance considerations about:

- risks to children and young people
- risks to families
- risks to the workforce

Social workers and their managers are best placed to make professional judgements of risk in each case and decide what form of contact they need to maintain in order to ensure the safety of children and young people. There are many ways to keep in touch with a child, young person or family without physical face-to-face contact.

We recognise that there are circumstances where it will be necessary for social workers and other staff to visit children in person. Where face-to-face work is deemed necessary, practitioners should take account of Public Health England (PHE) advice on [social distancing](#) and minimising the spread of infection to keep safe both themselves and the family they are visiting.

Do children’s social care staff need to use personal protective equipment (PPE) for coronavirus (COVID-19)?

Where social workers and other staff are undertaking home visits, PPE is not required unless the people being visited are symptomatic of coronavirus (COVID-19) or have a confirmed diagnosis of coronavirus (COVID-19). Where coronavirus (COVID-19) is suspected or confirmed, those undertaking the visit should use PPE in line with the latest [Public Health England \(PHE\) guidance](#).

DfE is working with government partners to get the required equipment to frontline staff as quickly and effectively as possible.

What happens if families refuse entry to social workers, including if they are self-isolating?

Children and families may feel anxious about infection risks. Where this anxiety is present and families are reluctant to engage with social workers, social workers should make contact with families and explain why it is essential that they have access to the home, or to see and speak to the children, to ensure they are safe and well. This need not always be a thorough, face-to-face visit, but should be sufficient to reassure the social worker that the child is not currently at risk of harm.

There may, of course, be other reasons why families may refuse access and where they do and there is a risk to the life of the child or a likelihood of immediate serious harm, local authorities should follow the immediate protection procedures set out in [working together to safeguard children](#).

Should local authorities be encouraging vulnerable children to attend their educational setting?

There is an expectation that vulnerable children who have a social worker will attend an educational setting, so long as they do not have underlying health conditions that put them at severe risk. In circumstances where a parent does not want to bring their child to an educational setting, and their child is considered vulnerable, the social worker and educational setting should explore the reasons for this directly with the parent.

Where parents are concerned about the risk of a child contracting coronavirus (COVID-19), the educational setting or social worker should talk through these anxieties with the parent following the advice set out by [Public Health England](#).

Many children and young people with Education, Health and Care (EHC) plans can safely remain at home. Educational settings and local authorities will need to consider the needs of

all children and young people with an EHC plan, alongside the views of their parents, and make a risk assessment for each child or young person.

Local authorities and education settings should decide together who is best placed to undertake the risk assessment, noting that the duty to ensure provision remains with the local authority. For more about this, see the [vulnerable children guidance](#).

What support should local authorities be providing to children who have a social worker?

Safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children remains of paramount importance. For many parents, carers and children, access to support, including the services offered by other safeguarding partners, educational settings or the third sector, can be invaluable in helping to keep children safe and families sufficiently supported. As far as possible, multi-agency support should continue, whilst being mindful of changes in how this is offered, for example, offering telephone or online support rather than face-to-face meetings where it is safe to do so.

Local authorities should be conscious of reduced protective factors available to children and families and the increased stressors as a result of coronavirus (COVID-19) and try to ensure continuity and consistency of support where possible.

Should multi-agency child protection conferences go ahead?

As far as possible, multi-agency conferences should go ahead, using communication technology where appropriate. Multi-agency working is crucial to ensuring the protection of vulnerable children, and we welcome local authority and their partners' creativity in ensuring that vital information-sharing and joint risk assessments continue to benefit children at this time.

Child protection conferences and multi-agency front door assessments of referrals are particularly critical to protect vulnerable children. We recognise that there may be instances where multi-agency working will need to be done differently during this period, and we encourage local authorities to continue as best they can in the circumstances to ensure they are able to make decisions in the best interests of the child.

What barriers are there to sharing information where there are concerns about a child?

Practitioners will be aware of the importance of sharing information in a timely way, particularly in the current circumstances. Any practitioner working with a child can share relevant personal information lawfully, including without consent where necessary, if it is to keep a child safe from harm or to protect their physical, mental and emotional well-being. The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 do not prevent, or limit, the sharing of information for the purposes of keeping children safe.

Practitioners are reminded that if they are concerned about a safeguarding data sharing matter, they are advised to seek advice from legal representatives where appropriate, other

practitioners, or the information governance lead, in line with guidance on [information sharing for practitioners providing safeguarding services](#).

Alternative provision (AP)

Is the expectation that all alternative provision (AP) schools and providers must remain open?

Not all settings will remain open. We know however that significant numbers of children in AP meet the definition of vulnerable – a high proportion of AP pupils have a social worker (children in need, those on child protection plans or those who are looked after by the local authority) and/or are children with EHC plans.

Local arrangements are required in order to determine the best way to protect this group of vulnerable children in AP, including by keeping AP settings open where it is feasible to do so. Local authorities will be best placed to determine how this can be delivered locally, working closely with local schools and headteachers, and regional schools commissioners.

How do local authorities best support vulnerable children who attend AP if providers in an area cannot remain open?

Where it is not possible for an AP setting to remain open to support this small group of vulnerable children, local authorities and schools will need to assess the safeguarding needs of those children on a case by case basis, working with social workers and other agencies to make appropriate arrangements. This is no different to what we are asking of all educational settings.

What is the expectation of APs in relation to vulnerable children if they do close?

The AP sector is well placed to identify and cater for the needs of these young people when they are not in school. The protocols put in place for the school holidays are typically thorough and effective.

During this period of education closures, we ask that APs continue to be highly vigilant in safeguarding these young people and share this practice with others making decisions about how best to look after these children.

This may mean contacting a young person's social worker if they do not attend as expected or making regular phone calls to the parents or carers of children who are remaining at home.

Safeguarding

Does the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel still need to be notified when there is a serious incident involving children and young people?

Yes.

Understanding any changes in the nature and complexity of serious incidents as a result of the current situation will be critical in how the government responds and reacts to support safeguarding partners.

The duty to provide a notification of all serious child safeguarding incidents within the current timescales (5 working days) remains with the local authority; however, statutory safeguarding partners should follow local protocols relating to the identification, notification and reviewing of all serious incidents.

We are ensuring that the online notification system remains active and available 24 hours a day.

Are safeguarding partnerships still required to undertake a rapid review and submit a report to the panel within 15 working days?

A rapid review continues to be a vital tool for learning from serious incidents locally and nationally. Having a 15-day target for undertaking and reporting a rapid review may not be achievable if partners cannot be drawn together or where other operational demands prevent this.

Our expectation is that local safeguarding partnerships should make decisions locally on how quickly they can undertake a rapid review in the current circumstances.

We would ask that the rapid review is expedited where there is a child death or serious injury in the context of abuse and neglect, and coronavirus (COVID-19) is a strongly related factor, and where local safeguarding partners think other partnerships could learn from this, in line with guidance on [undertaking a rapid review](#).

Do local Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews need to be initiated and published within 6 months?

We appreciate that undertaking more in-depth practice reviews within 6 months may not be possible at the moment.

We ask safeguarding partners and/or local authorities to inform us of any decision about initiating and/or publishing a review at both the following email addresses:

- mailbox.cpod@education.gov.uk
- mailbox.NationalReviewPanel@education.gov.uk

Children's homes and residential settings

How do I keep my workforce and young people in residential settings safe from coronavirus (COVID-19) and how do I mitigate the risk of it spreading?

Local authorities can refer to [guidance on residential care provision](#) and [guidance on isolation for residential settings](#).

What should we do if one of our children’s homes does not have enough members of staff to operate?

Ensuring that vulnerable children remain protected is a top priority for the government. Local authorities have been working closely with residential homes on continuity plans to ensure they can safely remain open and should remain in close contact. We are considering additional options to help those providers with staffing shortages to ensure they are able to continue operating as safely as possible in a challenging context and to ensure that the children in these homes continue to receive the care and support they need.

You should continue to notify Ofsted if your home is going to close. Where you have an immediate or impending staffing shortage which may lead to the closure of your home, you should discuss that as a matter of urgency with the relevant placing local authorities. It would also be helpful to notify Ofsted who will share this information with DfE.

With staff shortages and the requirement for symptomatic children to isolate, how can we ensure suitable placements for those children and young people who are entering the social care system and need a suitable fostering or residential place?

The government has announced £1.6 billion of funding for local authorities to help them address pressures arising from coronavirus (COVID-19). This includes funding to support children’s social care to secure additional placements should that be needed. Local authorities should prioritise, where possible, recruiting and developing their local fostering capacity to help meet demand.

Ofsted is prioritising existing applications for registration and reviewing progress in provision with restrictions on places to support the sector with capacity.

If placements in children’s homes or foster care cannot be found, is it acceptable to use unregulated provision?

Local authorities will need to ensure that the accommodation provided to children meets their needs to the best of their ability given the current context. Placements in independent and semi-independent provision can be the right choice for some older children, acting as a stepping-stone to adult life, and we expect these to continue. Local authorities should continue to do all they can to promote the welfare of looked after children and ensure their safety.

Any setting that does deliver care wholly or mainly for children, and meets the definition set out in the Care Standards Act 2000, should be registered with Ofsted as a children’s home.

Unaccompanied asylum seeking children (UASC)

Where can symptomatic UASC self-isolate and what is being done to increase capacity for UASC self-isolation?

Where an unaccompanied asylum seeking child arrives in England and is symptomatic of coronavirus (COVID-19), the local authority receiving them will need to take steps to ensure that they are placed in suitable accommodation in isolation from other people in line with [PHE self-isolation guidance](#).

We encourage local authorities to engage with their existing service providers to find suitable premises and staff to enable the self-isolation. We recognise that if this is required for significant numbers of UASC, it will put some local authorities under pressure. DfE is consulting with a range of local authorities to understand what arrangements they are putting in place, and how we can best support them to deliver their statutory duties and protect these vulnerable children during these difficult times.

Who will have legal responsibility for UASC in self-isolation accommodation?

As with any spontaneous arrival, the local authority that initially collects the child (for example, from the police station or from Border Force) should assess the child's needs as they would do in normal circumstances. The local authority will be responsible for the child and should place them in suitable self-isolation accommodation if the child is exhibiting symptoms.

Care leavers

How should local authorities meet their responsibilities to care leavers?

We are aware that care leavers continue to be a vulnerable group, particularly in the current situation.

Local authorities should continue to do their best to meet statutory duties such as providing personal advisers to care leavers and preparing or reviewing pathway plans. We do recognise the additional pressure local authorities are under, and if they need to alter the support they are able to offer care leavers during this period, they should assess their needs and prioritise the most vulnerable.

The government has announced additional funding for local authorities to help them address pressures arising from coronavirus (COVID-19). We would encourage local authorities to utilise some of this funding to provide discretionary payments to care leavers to cover items such as food, utilities and rent during this period if required.

Are personal advisers still expected and able to visit care leavers?

Personal advisers should use their judgement to determine the nature of their contact with the young people they work with during this period. For some, this will still involve face-to-face visits.

Where appropriate, we encourage personal advisers to use technology to contact young people through phone or video, to minimise the need for face-to-face contact. We recognise that there may need to be a change in the level and type of contact with young people during this time.

Personal advisers will also want to use their own judgement on the level and frequency of contact for each care leaver, taking into account their individual circumstances and levels of vulnerability.

Personal advisers and their manager should use their own judgement to assess the level of risk and to prioritise cases where face-to-face contact is unavoidable, as it is not possible to provide the right level of support to the care leaver by phone or video.

Where face-to-face work is deemed necessary, personal advisers should take account of advice on [social distancing](#) and minimising the spread of infection to keep both themselves, and the care leavers they are visiting, safe.

Should we continue to transition care leavers who are turning 18 into independent living? Can care leavers still be moved between different accommodation settings if necessary?

Local authorities should act in the best interests of care leavers. We would encourage them to use their discretion to assess whether care leavers should continue to transition into suitable accommodation and/or independence or remain in their placement during this period.

We appreciate that finding suitable and available accommodation may be a challenge currently, and there is an increased need for young people to have stability and support at this difficult time. We are consulting with a range of local authorities to understand accommodation needs at this time.

Courts

What is happening with the courts during this coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak?

We are working hard across government and with the judiciary to make sure that the family justice system continues to operate during this unprecedented time. The Family Courts have issued [guidance on moving towards delivering remote hearings](#).

What about court orders related to contact for children in care?

We expect that contact between children in care and their birth relatives will continue. It is essential for children and families to remain in touch at this difficult time, and for some children, the consequences of not seeing relatives would be traumatising.

Contact arrangements should therefore be assessed on a case by case basis taking into account a range of factors including the government's [social distancing](#) guidance and the needs of the child. It may not be possible, or appropriate, for the usual face-to-face contact to happen at this time and keeping in touch will, for the most part, need to take place virtually. We expect the spirit of any contact orders made in relation to children in care to be maintained and will look to social workers to determine how best to support those valuable family interactions based on the circumstances of each case.

Fostering

What happens to foster children if foster carers are self-isolating or become ill?

We recognise the importance of maintaining a permanent stable setting for children wherever possible. In most cases, we expect that children will remain with their foster parents in line with the [social distancing](#) guidance issued by the government. We are considering what further steps fostering services can take to support foster families in these circumstances.

If a foster carer is in a vulnerable group, should the foster child continue to attend their educational setting?

If a foster carer, or someone in their household, is in a vulnerable group, local authorities should discuss the potential risks with them. They should ensure that these factors are taken into account when assessing, with the local authority Virtual School Head, how the child's need can best be met and whether attending education is in the best interests of the foster child.

Further guidance is available on [social distancing for everyone in the UK and protecting older people and vulnerable adults](#) and [shielding and protecting people defined on medical grounds as extremely vulnerable](#).

What if there are not enough foster carers to care for additional children or provide respite for other foster carers who have become ill?

We recognise that it might be challenging to provide additional respite for foster carers in this context. We are exploring flexibilities in the fostering regulations and guidance around the time restrictions on short breaks, temporary approvals for foster carers and emergency placements, and ways to free up more space within existing foster homes to make it easier to identify potential placements and ensure new foster carers are assessed and approved without delay.

We might need to recruit and approve more foster carers in the short term. What is being done to change the regulations related to fostering panels?

We recognise that fostering services will want to bring in more emergency foster carers to help build capacity within their services in case of additional demand. We would encourage them to do this. Whilst they will want to ensure that assessments and approvals are thorough and comply with regulations, we do not want this to be unnecessarily delayed. Under Regulation 24 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, there is already sufficient flexibility for fostering services to convene remote panels.

We are considering whether we need to make amendments to the regulations to reduce the required number of members.

Can we change the number of children that a foster household can care for?

Foster carer approval terms, including age range and number of placements, may need to be flexible in the current circumstances. Schedule 7 of the Children Act 1989 currently allows for some flexibility in placing multiple children together by allowing local authorities to grant exemptions to the usual fostering limit in specific placements (explained further in the [Assessment and approval of foster carers: Volume 4: Fostering Services guidance \(2013\)](#)).

Where fostering services are concerned about capacity, they could start identifying potential fostering households that may be able to accommodate additional children and to have sensitive and appropriate conversations as part of their contingency planning. No fostering household will be expected to take additional children into their home but many will want to offer help and these families should be enabled to do so.

Adoption

Should we stop all introductory meetings for children with new adopted parents?

Whilst we understand that these will be challenging in current circumstances there should not be a blanket ban. There needs to be a case by case, risk-based decision.

Regional Adoption Agencies should consider utilising communication technology to continue with the adoption process.

We accept that for some children introductory meetings may have to be postponed, but we welcome creativity to prioritise permanent placements for children in line with their best interests.

During this challenging period, can we move to stage two of the adopter assessment process without having completed the health assessment or having disclosure and barring service (DBS) clearance?

We expect adoption agencies to take a common sense, risk-based approach during this unprecedented period. If prospective adopters would like to proceed to stage 2 and local authorities are happy to proceed without the health assessment and/or DBS clearance, they should do so as long as these checks are completed before the end of stage 2.

During this time, prospective adopters will not be able to access the Independent Review Mechanism (IRM) if the reasons they are not determined suitable to adopt are linked to either their health assessment or their DBS check.

Should we stop adoption panels?

Local authorities and Regional Adoption Agencies should consider how panels can continue to ensure the adoption system continues to place children, but we accept that some delays may occur.

Are adopted children entitled to attend education?

Places in educational settings are reserved for children of critical workers and vulnerable children. Vulnerable children include children who are supported by social care, and those with safeguarding and welfare needs. Full guidance on eligibility can be found in [maintaining education provision](#).

Leaders of educational settings and local authorities know who their most vulnerable children are and will have the flexibility to offer a place to those on the edges of receiving children's social care support.

This could include adopted children or children subject to special guardianship orders or wider kinship placements. For some of these children, attending education would best meet their needs and may stop a placement breakdown. Local authorities and education settings should therefore sympathetically consider requests from adoptive parents and special guardian carers. These should be assessed on a case by case basis, taking into account the additional needs of many of these children and advice from local authority Virtual School Heads.

Workforce

What is the process for social workers who have left the profession to become re-registered?

Social Work England has written to all social workers who have left the profession in the last 2 years, letting them know the process for re-registering and how to help in this unprecedented time. We are working to help employers in need of additional social workers to get in touch with those who feel they can contribute. Registrants can register their interest via the [LGA website](#).

How can the quality of social workers returning to the profession be guaranteed?

Anyone who has had a fitness to practice case upheld will not be able to qualify for re-registration. Local authorities will be required to undertake their usual employment checks.

How should local authorities handle DBS checks for social workers returning to the profession?

Social workers, and others, brought in for coronavirus (COVID-19) purposes are [eligible for free, fast-tracked DBS checks](#).

Are student social workers able to support local authorities during this time?

Students on placements make an important contribution to local social work services teams and are considered critical workers. We do not currently think the emergency registration of students, allowing them to take up social worker roles before they have completed their training, will be necessary but this will be kept under review. More guidance is available from [Social Work England](#).

Ofsted

Will other bodies such as Ofsted or the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) be offering any of their social workers to work on the frontline or to provide wider support for the coronavirus (COVID-19) response?

Government agencies are currently assessing priorities and recognise the challenges that local authorities may face during this time. If there is available capacity, social workers will be freed up in order to provide extra support on the frontline.

Ofsted is working closely with the department to assess where local authorities need support to tackle issues arising from coronavirus (COVID-19) and providing support.

Cafcass is continuing discussions about how to prioritise work in the family justice and local authority systems in order to ensure that the best interests of children are prioritised at all times.

What is happening with Ofsted inspections?

The Secretary of State for Education has agreed with Ofsted that it will suspend routine inspections of children's social care services and settings. Urgent inspections where specific concerns have been raised can still go ahead, to ensure that children's safety is prioritised. These will take the format of a monitoring inspection focused on the issues raised and without an inspection judgement.

Ofsted's regulatory role and work is continuing, and it has taken a range of action to ensure that it is responding proportionately to the current context that regulated provision is operating in. Ofsted is providing regular updates to educational and children's social care settings and local authorities on its approach to key issues.

We are in discussion with Ofsted about how to monitor risk and fragility in the system in the absence of routine inspection.