**POLICY DOCUMENT: For the use of NCC staff**

**Family Contact Arrangements in Response to COVID-19**

**Review Date: 07/01/2021**

**Authorised by: Children First Northamptonshire; Emergency Planning Arrangements.**

Please also see the information for parents and carers

Letter to children

Parent Contact Letter

**Family contact arrangements**

**1. Legal Framework**

1.1 The Local Authority recognises the legal framework within which Local Authorities are responsible for facilitating contact between children in care and key individuals in their lives.

Section 34(1) of the Children Act 1989:

The Local Authority must allow reasonable contact with:

* parents;
* any guardian;
* any person who held a Residence Order or Child Arrangements Order for residence immediately before the Care Order was made; and
* any person who had care of the child under Wardship immediately before the Care Order was made.

**Government guidance**

1.2 The Local Authority has further revised how to promote looked after children’s family time or contact safely during the current Covid crisis. Contact and family time has, since March 2020 been taking place through ‘virtual’ arrangements by using traditional and more modern technologies. More recently a combination of face-to-face and virtual family time has allowed children and young people to continue their relationships with their parents, siblings and other family members.

1.3 This policy is informed by the change to the government guidance, whereby a further period of national lockdown has been introduced in response to the rising number of cases of Covid-19 and detection of a more transmissible variant of the virus. It has therefore, been necessary to review the Local Authority’s position on in person family time/contact between families and children.

1.4 Government guidance permits for the continued contact birth parents and children in care, as well as between siblings in care. In considering contact arrangements, the safety of all those involved (children, young people, families, carers and those who transport children to contact) will be planned by following clear risk assessments for individuals and premises, taking into consideration relevant government advice that might be issued at any time.

When contact arrangements resume they will continue to be assessed on a case by case basis taking into account a range of factors including parental cooperation and the needs of the child and the health of all those concerned.

**2. Overview**

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2.1          Due to the increased numbers of transmission of the Corona virus and in line with the government guidance that schools should be closed to all pupils with the exception of vulnerable pupils and the children of key workers, there is a need to review family time with face-to-face family time taking place for children only where a risk assessment has determined that levels of risk can be managed in a safe way. For children for whom face-to-face contact is considered, risk assessments will take account of a range of factors including parental cooperation and the needs of the child and the health of all those concerned including the child or young person’s carer. Where face-to face family time is not possible, virtual family time will be facilitated.

2.2 Whilst it is hoped that as many children and young people as possible will be able to continue to enjoy face-to-face family time with their family members, it will be necessary to prioritise specific children and young people. These children and young people include the following groups:

1. Babies under 12 months and their siblings who live in the same household
2. Children and young people whose emotional wellbeing is assessed as likely to be impacted through an absence of face-to-face family time
3. Children and young people whose communication needs are such that they are unable to participate in virtual contact
4. Children and young people in unregulated placements
5. Children and young people who require face-to-face family time for their care plans to progress, for example, children subject to care proceedings where parenting assessments are taking place, children being rehabilitated to parent’s care, Wish You Well contacts.

If children and young people do not fall into these groups and positive virtual family time can take place, then this should be facilitated and promoted within their care plan at this time.

* 1. Family time/face to face contact will be offered on the following basis;
* 4 venues are currently being used for contact. 1 further venue may become available in near future
* Risk assessments are currently in place for each venue, completed in consultation with colleagues in Place agreed by health and safety and the Unions
* Established cleaning arrangements will continue before and after each contact.
* Family time will be limited, where possible, to 3 households meeting at any one time, this is inclusive of the contact supervisor representing one household
* Parents must sign a new contact agreement with specific reference to Covid 19
* Parents and the child’s carer must report any symptoms of Covid 19 prior to contact taking place and accept that contact in such circumstances, will be cancelled
* PPE must be worn by adults which will include the appropriate mask which will be provided. If adults are exempt from wearing face masks, then medical evidence needs to be provided.
* Social distancing will be followed wherever possible, according to a child’s age and understanding
* Parents and carers must not arrive early or stay after the end of contact to prevent overlap
* Transport arrangements will be considered within the risk assessment. Wherever possible carers are requested to transport children to/from contact. Use of public transport will be discouraged and taxi’s will only be used in exceptional circumstances.

Additional guidance on cleaning the use of PPE, transport and what to do if a child becomes ill, referenced below will be used for the purpose of risk assessments

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/safe-working-in-education-childcare-and-childrens-social-care>

2.4 Arrangements will remain in place to facilitate contact through ‘virtual’ applications (e.g. Skype, WhatsApp); allowing the child and parent (or siblings) to see each other and/or more traditional arrangement such as telephone contact, photographs, letters, cards and drawing.

**3. Arrangements**

3.1 It is the Contact Service’s responsibility to develop ***new contact agreement*** for each child (and their parent(s)/family). This plan should be agreed and signed by the parent prior to the contact resuming. None adherence to the contact agreement may mean that contact returns to a virtual offer only

3.2When appropriate a ***contact will take place with a few adults as possible and maybe*** delivered in a child/young person’s placement by agreement with carers and residential workers, unless the disclosure of an address need to be prevented. To reduce exposure by contact workers carers maybe asked to remain in contact sessions instead unless this is inappropriate.

3.3 The Contact Service supported by the child’s allocated Social Worker will ensure that parents understand the arrangements and their commitments to inform of symptoms of covid 19

3.4 Where the child’s circumstances remain before the court, the child’s Social Worker will ensure that a clear rationale is recorded on a child’s records and all legal parties receive a copy of the ***new contact agreement.***

3.5 The duration of contact offered will continue to be limited to one hour. This reduces the risk of transmission of the virus and also allows for contacts to be staggered; allowing time for cleaning of the rooms and avoiding congestion in waiting areas.

**4. Responsibilities of the Contact Service:**

* To deliver ***contact plan*s** for contact arrangements and continue to deliver virtual contact where appropriate.
* To co-ordinate between carers and parents to ensure plans are implemented and adapted as necessary.
* To support children parents and carers in the arrangements
* Ensure the safety of children and adults on arrival departure and during contact

**4. Responsibilities of the child’s allocated Social Worker/Team Manager**

* The Social Worker will talk to the child about a new arrangement and ensure their views to be recorded on the child’s CareFirst file.
* The Team Managers will ensure that every child’s record on CareFirst, has management oversight completed (management decision/observations). This management decision should clearly record how the child is having contact and any risks.
* The Social Worker will consult on arrangements with the child’s independent reviewing officer IRO to obtain their view and seek agreement around proposed change. The Social Worker will record and share this view with the contact service
* The Social Worker will consult on arrangements with the CAFCASS appointed guardian to obtain their view. The Social Worker will record and share this view
* Social Worker and Team Manager to liaise with legal and ensure instructions for contact arrangements resumption, are provided for legal advocates meetings and court hearings, so the designated Judge can be informed.