**Information for parents and carers.**

Northamptonshire County Council (NCC) has not received any central government guidance in respect of the approach that local authorities should take with regard to direct contact for parents and relatives of children in care.

In NCC the Senior Leadership Team has reviewed how to manage contact and family time for you and your children taking into account available Public Health, National Health guidance, and the directive from the Prime Minister to ‘Stay at home ‘ NCC has to balance the management of face to face contact and keep everyone safe.

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others

NCC is mindful of its legal responsibilities and the Courts powers which are summarised here:

* For children in care the duty is to allow *reasonable* contact.
* Reasonable contact implies contact which is agreed between a local authority and parent or in absence of agreement, which is objectively reasonable.
* The general duty for all looked after children is to promote contact with parents, relatives and friends unless not reasonably practicable or consistent with their welfare to do so.
* Parents may apply to court for contact. The court has the power to make orders with conditions for contact arrangements.
* Any important decisions about a looked after child involve obtaining the wishes and feelings of the child and parents and consulting with them before a decision is made.

NCC are taking the same approach as many other local authorities in temporarily suspending face to face contact. As of 27/03/2020 and for the foreseeable future, face to face contacts will be replaced with virtual contact. .

NCC is concerned that it simply cannot safely provide a face to face contact service at the present time in a way that will be able to keep all the people involved in each contact protected.

The Prime Minister has made it clear that the public health emergency requires that all of us must stay at home. He said that people:

 *“should not be meeting family members who do not live in your home”*

He went on to say:

*“That is why people will only be allowed to leave their home for the following very limited purposes: shopping for basic necessities, as infrequently as possible; one form of exercise a day – for example a run, walk, or cycle – alone or with members of your household; any medical need, to provide care or to help a vulnerable person; and travelling to and from work, but only where this is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home.”*

That announcement has brought NCC to a firm policy decision that all contact for children in care during the crisis, and subject to review, should be indirect via Skype/Teams and or other available apps. This is not just for the sake of the children’s welfare but also for the protection of parents, relatives, foster carers, contact workers and our whole community.

NCC position is that at the current time, continuing with face to face contact would mean that it was not compliant with its duty to safeguard and promote a child’s welfare nor is the promotion of face to face contact practicable or consistent with children’s welfare until government guidance changes.

NCC will work hard to ensure the same regularity of contact. However, it will have to consider factors such as the technology available and the health and wellbeing of children carers and parents to supporting these arrangements, this could mean if children parents or carers have symptoms, that contact cannot practicably take place. NCC is willing to assist parents in providing solutions where technology is not available to them.

* Where children are disabled and need help with communication we will help them via their usual method of communication
* Where there is a need when English is not the first language, we will support calls with interpreters.

Contact workers and foster carers will take the lead in facilitating video calls at the current day and start time of contact. The contact worker with the foster carers will be responsible for calling parents and supervising the contact and ensuring adherence to time keeping. They will maintain a log of this contact in terms of dates, times and content and ensure the logs are provided to the social worker. All contact workers and foster carers will be provided with a template for this log. The same applies to children’s homes staff.

* Foster carers will not be expected to have discussions with the parent for any other matters.

Parents are asked not to contact the foster carer unless there is an arrangement to do so in advance. All communication from parents needs to continue through the routes that are already established or the contact workers and the allocated social worker. For example, if a parent usually makes arrangements with the contact worker or, the foster carer usually does this through the social worker, these arrangements should stay the same.

Social workers will liaise with parents, relatives and carers on a child by child basis, to agree durations of virtual contact where possible, but the following is provided as a very general guide of what might be possible and expected. The parent, contact worker and foster carer or residential worker might choose to make a completely different arrangement. It is essential that the contact is a positive experience for the child:

* **0 – 2 years old**: A video of the child will be sent to parents by the social worker, this is on the basis that a video call will not provide much opportunity for meaningful interaction between parent and child.
* **2 – 4 years old**: Up to 10 minutes in duration. If the child disengages with the call, the carer will seek to encourage engagement but if this cannot be achieved the call will be ended.
* **Infant school children (Reception – Year 2):** Up to 20 minutes in duration. If the child disengages with the call, the carer will seek to encourage engagement but if this cannot be achieved the call will be ended.
* **Junior school children (Year 3 – 6):** Up to 30 minutes in duration. If the child disengages with the call, the carer will seek to encourage engagement but if this cannot be achieved the call will be ended.
* **Secondary school children:** Up to 40 minutes in duration. If the child disengages with a call, the carer will seek to encourage engagement but if this cannot be achieved the call will be ended.

**Contact will also be put in place for siblings in separate placements in the same manner dependent on age.**

These arrangements will remain under constant review and considered in line with government guidance as this emerges.

The necessity for this policy to be put in place immediately for the safety of all has meant that it has not been practicable to consult widely. Of course, NCC will consider the comments of the Judiciary and all interested groups in taking matters forward.

The first full review of the policy will be in 3 weeks in line with the Prime Ministers advised timescales.

24th March 2020