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

**Family Contact Arrangements in response to COVID-19.**

**Authorisation Date: 25.03.20**

**Revised: 08.04.20**

**Review Date: 14.04.20**

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

Please also see the information for parents and carers

Letter to children

**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 In these unprecedented times, the Local Authority has revised how to promote looked after children’s safety, during contact and family time in the current Covid crisis, through ‘virtual’ (non face to face) arrangements by using traditional and more modern technologies.

1.3 This policy is informed by the government guidance, *staying at home and away from others,* imposed to reduce transmission during this critical time. You can see a link to the guidance below and the most recent DfE guidance issued on the 3/4/20*, What about court orders related to contact for children in care*?, that contact arrangements should 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.

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

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-childrens-social-care-services/coronavirus-covid-19-guidance-for-local-authorities-on-childrens-social-care

**2. Overview**

2.1 Due to the increased possibility of transmission of the Corona virus during face to face contact sessions (where a number of individuals regularly come into close contact at close distances,) the possibility of serious illness or death, and with due regard to the government’s announcement and guidance on ‘staying at home and away from others’ (23rd March 2020 - see below for link to government guidance) Northamptonshire’s Children’s Services will make an individual assessment of each child’s contact arrangement and the risks of harm that a choice to suspend contact or hold direct contact might have on the child and those participating taking into consideration government guidance *Do not meet others, even friends or family.*

 The decision about the choice of family contact arrangements will be reviewed in 3 weeks on 14th April 2020.

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

2.2 Arrangements are 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 ***a non-physical contact plan*** for each child (and their parent(s)/family). This plan should be developed in conjunction with the parent(s), carers, the allocated social worker and where appropriate the child/young person; and in consultation with the children independent reviewing officer (IRO)and if relevant the CAFCASS Children’s Guardian.

3.2When appropriate a ***non-physical contact plan*** should be delivered in a child/young person’s placement in a manner that, where necessary, does not identify the location or other members of the household. Privacy can be maintain by for example, carers can use a number shielding mechanism to protect phone numbers.

3.3 The Contact Service supported by the child’s allocated Social Worker will ensure that parents receive information and a letter, to explaining these changes (See Appendix 1) and a copy of the ***non-physical contact plan.***

3.4 Where the child’s circumstances are currently a matter of 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 ***non-physical contact plan*** and agreement from the court should be sought. The plan allows for dissenting views to be recorded and does not prevent parents from seeking legal advice or making applications to court for variations of this arrangement.

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

* To develop ***non-physical contact plan*s** for contact arrangements.
* 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

**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 the reason for the change, with regard to the guidance on the information to parents and carers document about suggested means types of contact.
* The Social Worker will consult on arrangements with the child’s independent reviewing officer IRO to obtain their view and seek agreement around the temporary 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 and seek agreement around the temporary change. The Social Worker will record and share this view
* Social Worker and Team Manager to liaise with legal and ensure instructions for any new contact arrangements, are provided for legal advocates meetings and court hearing, so agreement by the designated Judge can be sought.