



# **CHILDREN'S SERVICES OPERATIONAL GUIDANCE IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19**

**including Health and Safety arrangements for  
staff**

**Version 7.1 – 12/04/2021**

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## **Important – Use of buildings and home visits**

The over-arching aim of this guidance is to reinforce the message that for Children’s Services in North Somerset it is ‘business as usual’ in terms of our work with children, despite the need to make some adjustments to ensure everyone’s wellbeing as the Government’s restrictions on social contact are gradually eased. Therefore, it is acknowledged by the Chief Executive and the Corporate Leadership Team that colleagues in Children’s Services will need to:

- continue to visit their usual office base
- to work in other council buildings; and
- to complete home visits to children, young people and families

in order to effectively deliver our services. However, this guidance ensures that all such visits are subject careful risk assessment, planning and preparation to minimise risk to ourselves and the families we work with.

Please note however, that there are specific rules for colleagues who are more vulnerable to infection – which includes those over 60 years old and/or from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds. There are further details and links to guidance in the sections on [Working from Home](#) and [Information for Managers](#) below.

## **Introduction**

Since the first version of this guidance was issued in April 2020, we have learned considerably more about how to continue to provide effective services during the global pandemic. Many of the ways of working which we determined as an urgent measure are now our ‘business as usual’ and may remain so for some time given the continuing challenge of controlling Covid-19 in the community. However, with vaccinations proceeding at pace, regular testing available to practitioners, and an increasing understanding of the disease there are indications that we are on a path to a gradual opening up of society and services.

On this basis, we have reviewed and reissued this guidance to reinforce the expectations on our services to see children and families face to face unless it is not safe to do and in those instances the risk assessment document should be used. We have also expanded the guidance to include Family Time/Supervised Contact and guidance on safety when undertaking ‘virtual’ work with children and young people.

While we continue to provide critical services, and to support the most vulnerable children in North Somerset, it’s important that we look after ourselves too. In particular, it’s essential that we all continue to recognise and respond sensitively to the anxieties which some colleagues may have, particularly those who are in a vulnerable group themselves, or who care for someone who may be vulnerable.

## **Adaptations to normal working practices**

This document has been informed by and should be read in conjunction with:

- North Somerset Council’s General Covid 19 Risk Assessment
- Current Department for Education and DHSC guidance
- Guidance from Public Health England on use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
- Relevant legislation and related regulations

- North Somerset Council's Lone Working and Personal Safety Procedure (Children's Services)

However, mindful of the significant risk which Covid-19 poses across society, and the wider Health and Safety duties on the Local Authority, this guidance explains our strengths-based approach to the way in which we engage with children and young people and their families to ensure we prevent infection spread and protect them and ourselves and colleagues.

## **Risk Assessments**

The transmission, either through the air or by touching affected surfaces, of Covid-19 remains a significant risk and the council, services and individuals must take all reasonable steps to reduce the risk to ourselves, our colleagues and the children and families we work with. However, we expect that almost all visits will be at home/face-to-face as usual.

Children's services practitioners will continue to consider any possible increase in risk of harm to the child from infection control measures during the Covid-19 Pandemic. These will inform assessments and case summaries and will be a key consideration in the programme of Assurance Visits currently being undertaken by Ofsted.

Our assessments will also support decision-making which determines if there are any Covid-19 related issues which would prevent the child or young person from being seen in the home setting or whether an alternative method of contact could safely be made. This may include a virtual visit, or if appropriate a socially distanced visit outdoors. Variations to business as usual must be captured within the Covid risk assessment for each child that we are prevented from delivering support in a way that reflects "business as usual".

Where children are in our care and placed and/or educated outside North Somerset it is particularly important that any additional risks are identified and recorded.

Children who have a PEP should have the risk assessment recorded in their current PEP document.

## **Planning and undertaking home visits**

### **Before the visit**

- Families or carers must be contacted before a visit by phone to check if any member of the household has any Covid 19 symptoms, has been tested, is asymptomatic or now are self-isolating. As this may lead to the visit being undertaken in a different way or postponed.
- Families should be encouraged to access [free Lateral Flow Tests](#) which can detect non-symptomatic infections.
- Practitioners should check case recording systems for any risks or issues noted in the risk assessment/case summary relating to Covid-19 and any increased risks. This may be critical in balancing the need to visit with the potential risk.
- If everyone in the household is symptom-free and/or has not received a positive test result then most visits may go ahead as normal, whilst following all appropriate guidance.

- Managers must ensure that all employee's measures and protocols are adhered to and address specific issues including two metres social distancing. The [current North Somerset Council guidance](#) should be read by all staff and any individual issues or concerns raised in supervision / 1:1 sessions as necessary.

## During the visit

- Ask the child or young person and their family members to stay at least two metres away from you during the visit. If this is not possible, we would advise that you have a standard face mask or covering available for your use. Similarly, if a member of the household asks you to wear a face covering, we would advise that you do this.
- Face shields or visors are only required for protective use in medical or intimate care settings and are not necessary for a home visit. They are only effective for the protection of the eyes. They may however be useful when working with a young person on the autistic spectrum who relies heavily on non-verbal cues or has a hearing disability and relies on lip reading or non-verbal cues.
- Minimise any items that you take into the home, only take what is necessary and sanitise them as necessary after the visit.
- Ensure you wash your hands with soap and water or use sanitiser before and after each visit. Be mindful of touching anything and if you do, use sanitiser wipes/gel to clean it.
- If there is known or suspected Covid-19 infection in the household and assessment deems the visit critically important, then a specific risk assessment must be undertaken in line with latest PHE advice for dealing with children and families that are suspected or confirmed cases of Covid-19. Practitioners should ensure that PPE as per PHE current guidance worn as required. The council's health and safety team can provide support in such circumstances.
- Managers who need further advice should contact:

Nicola Dixon  
Health and Safety Manager  
01275 884675  
07917 228322  
[nicola.dixon@n-somerset.gov.uk](mailto:nicola.dixon@n-somerset.gov.uk)

## Transporting a child or young person in a Car

It is recognised that practitioners will need to transport children and young people in their own cars as part of normal business. Appendix 2 provides guidelines for safe transport of passengers. As keyworkers all Children's Services practitioners continue to be eligible to access North Somerset Pool Cars should their own vehicle be unavailable or unsuitable for social distancing.

Please note that if you suspect a child or young person has symptoms of Covid-19 and they need to travel, you should discuss this urgently with your Team Manager for further risk assessment and guidance.

## **Practitioners use of office and buildings**

The general use of offices and buildings will be governed by the current local and national measures in place, with clear corporate messages provided to all staff. Currently the advice remains for all staff to work at home wherever practical, though the Town Hall and Castlewood Gateways are subject to a plan to gradually restore public access.

However, it is recognised that there will be occasions when practitioners delivering children's services need to use offices, which may include the need to meet service users in our buildings, the arrangements for which are included in the building or a building area risk assessment, where the service has sole use. Where public access is not available to our main buildings, alternatives should be considered which ideally reduce the need to travel long distances – a list of possible locations across the area including contact details for booking is provided in Appendix 3.

In order to manage the greatly reduced capacity of our workplaces, managers will need to authorise all attendance and to have regard to both risk assessments of the building, and any risk assessment arising from an individual's specific vulnerability. All risk assessments will be kept under review. Only practitioners based in a building should book office space there, and currently use of any desk in an office that is not your usual workplace is prohibited.

Those who are notified through track and trace or the positive case themselves should follow current national guidance on the need and duration of self-isolation required. Any employee displaying symptoms of Covid-19 will be sent home/advised to stay at home and self-isolate, following the latest government guidance. The employee should immediately inform their line manager of anyone with whom the worker may have had recent close contact while undertaking their duties to enable them to arrange testing. The manager must inform HR and the Facilities Help Desk.

Practitioners are encouraged to be tested as per latest guidelines and follow instructions regarding self-isolation if they are identified as a contact by NHS Test and Trace and to follow current advice regarding self-isolating.

North Somerset Nurseries and Children's Centres will continue to be open with some reduction in service provision to allow for National and Local guidance for social distancing and the ability to implement additional control measures.

## **Working from home**

The current corporate policy remains that all staff continue to work from home where practically possible. Whilst working at home all staff should remain logged in, should respond to e-mails, telephone or other calls and alerts on Liquid Logic/EHM/Childview or other systems. During this time, it is vital that people's whereabouts are known and that out-of-office notifications are updated and switched on where appropriate.

Shielding is no longer deemed necessary by the Government, however we recognise that some colleagues will be regarded as [Clinically Vulnerable](#), including those over 60 years old and/or or from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background. Some colleagues may have health conditions which mean they are regarded as [Clinically Extremely Vulnerable](#).

If you fall into these categories you should discuss arrangements with your line manager, who will have regard to the [latest guidance](#) in undertaking an individual risk assessment. There is a clear expectation that all vulnerable employees will have their individual risks assessment reviewed and updated by their team leader before they return to the office or visit service users.

All staff should consider taking advantage of [free Lateral Flow Tests](#) which can detect non-symptomatic infections.

People who are isolating due to advice from the NHS App, contact from NHS Test and Trace or a positive test result should continue to work at home if they are not unwell, but should continue isolating. Those who are symptomatic should be recorded on iTrent as absent due to sickness. A separate iTrent category is available for those self-isolating. Staff may return to work after the period of isolation required by [current guidelines](#).

It is essential that all practitioners ensure that they update their team leader as soon as they have concerns that they, or a member of their household, is unwell. Everybody who is working will need to be prepared to be called on a short notice, including the same day, should a service area/team need support due to sickness levels being critical.

## **Information for Managers – Managing and Reporting Employee Infection**

- All managers should be familiar with the Council's latest guidance on Covid-19 which is available via [The Source](#). Including notifying HR if they have a colleague who has tested positive and the Facilities Help Desk if they have been in a council building.
- If a practitioner reports that they may have been exposed to Covid-19, they should immediately return home and self-isolate in line with [current government guidance](#).
- Staff should be strongly encouraged to be tested. More information on current testing arrangements are [available here](#).
- All colleagues working in Social Care can access a test if needed. They can be self-booked via [www.gov.uk/coronavirus](http://www.gov.uk/coronavirus) or by dialling 119.
- After notifying HR straight away, Managers should record employees who are self-isolating on iTrent, though they may continue to work from home if they are well. Please consider how duties may be reassigned within the team to facilitate this while limiting the impact on colleagues.
- Managers should also ask the employee to inform them of any close contacts during the preceding 48 hours, and whether these contacts have been notified to [NHS Test and Trace](#). It may be necessary to inform these contacts that they may have been exposed to

Covid-19, though care should be taken to avoid disclosing personal information wherever possible.

- If a negative test result is received, the employee should complete the [period of self-isolation](#) before returning to normal duties. Please remember to enter an end date to the self-isolation period on iTrent.
- If a positive result is received, the employee should continue to self-isolate. iTrent should be updated to indicate that they have Covid-19. It is important that this is done promptly, as DfE request regular workforce updates. The employee may continue to work at home if they have no symptoms, provided this can be done safely and in line with all current government guidance.
- Should the employee feel well after the end of the self-isolation period they can return to work, and iTrent can be updated.
- Where colleagues fall into the Clinically Vulnerable (which now includes those over 60 and/or from a Black, Asian or minority ethnic background) or the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable categories, or who may otherwise be more vulnerable to infection an individual vulnerable person's risk assessment should be completed before they can return to the office or complete home visits. [The individual risk assessment can be downloaded here.](#)

## **Building Management and Infection Control**

All North Somerset Council managed buildings and or a building area risk assessment, where the service has sole use eg. the Resource Service, it will have a site-specific risk assessment, undertaken by the nominated building manager and agreed with the Corporate Health and Safety Team, specifying issues of concern and control measures appropriate for the layout and possible limitations of the site.

As a result of these assessments, strict infection control measures will have been implemented. These include ensuring all who enter buildings wash their hands-on arrival and regularly throughout the day and follow the conditions as agreed within the building risk assessment. Specific routes through buildings, closure of certain areas and restricted use of desks or rooms may also be required and colleagues should observe and respect all notices when moving around buildings and should wear face coverings in line with current local and national guidance.

All North Somerset Council managed sites have supplies of antibacterial wipes and staff are required to clean areas they use at least daily. Team managers can access supplies of PPE [via the online order form.](#)

It is essential that you ensure can remain two metres away from work colleagues should you spend any time in your place of work. Whilst undertaking any of your duties with service users either in their homes, outdoors or other venues is also essential that you maintain social distance.



## **Schools, early years settings and other buildings**

Please note that if you are working in buildings managed by our partners or other agencies, you should observe any specific guidelines they have in place. This includes all schools, clinics, hospitals and children's centres – all of which will have established their own risk assessments and control procedures. It is good practice to call ahead to ensure you have any PPE which you may require to undertake a visit or meeting.

Please note there is [specific North Somerset guidance for schools and early years settings](#) (this version is kept regularly updated). Practitioners working in these settings should ensure they are familiar with these, and with any local arrangements in place at the venue.

## **Group and Family Activities**

All planned group activities must be authorised by the Head of Service and may be subject to swift change in guidance if there is a change in COVID-19 prevalence. The guidance below assumes that there are no Local or National Restrictions in place which would otherwise prevent gatherings of adults or young people.

Groups that can be socially distanced by two metres at all times (eg. baby massage) can take place in Children's Centres – providing the risk to other users of the building is considered in the assessment, and that practitioners are careful to ensure that bathrooms and corridors don't become too busy. Groups should be small (numbers are based upon the space available and the nature of the activity) – practitioners planning group sessions should measure out and draw a plan for sign off by the Service Lead.

- Parenting groups such as 'Breaking the Chains' can go ahead as long as social distancing is maintained and again a with a maximum of six participants – about half the usual capacity. Sign off from the Service Lead is required.
- If a creche is needed, [DfE Nursery Childcare Guidance](#) must be adhered to. Numbers should be kept to a minimum and a creche only provided if essential. Further advice is available from Tracey Lewis, Early Help Team Leader ([tracey.lewis@n-somerset.gov.uk](mailto:tracey.lewis@n-somerset.gov.uk))
- Indoor and outdoor groups can take place. For parent and child groups this is limited to a maximum of 15 people, not including any volunteers, leaders or children under 5 years of age. Social distancing must be maintained by the adults who attend the group. These sessions will have to be booked in advance and can be attended only by the same group of families for the four-week duration of the group.
- Sanitising surfaces, bathrooms and equipment alongside hand washing and sanitising is essential.
- No refreshments should be served at all, though people can bring their own drinks – kitchens should not be used.
- Soft toys should not be available. Soft furnishings can be used with a sheet/cover over that is laundered between sessions.

- Checks should be in place through the day and recorded using a checklist – and should be monitored before and after each session.
- Outside areas can be sprayed with anti-bacterial spray but do not need to be wiped.
- It is accepted that children under 5 cannot socially distance – parents need to understand this and be accepting of this if they are to attend the session. Children under 11 should not wear masks unless national guidance changes to suggest this is required.
- In Family Centres business support staff must be actively involved in supporting the use of the indoor facilities, instructing visitors to wash their hands and wipe the bathrooms after use. Disinfectant wipes will be supplied in every toilet and signs will be provided to instruct people to wipe the area after they have used (and not to flush the wipes) Additional pedal top bins have been purchased.
- An example session might be structured as follows:
  - First group of families can attend 9:30 - 10:30
  - Clean and break 10:30 - 11:30
  - Second group of families can attend 11:30 – 12:30
  - Clean 12:30 - 1.30
- The principle is that session will be no longer than 1 hour and there will be enough time (at least 30 minutes) in between sessions to clean and reset for new young people or families to attend.
- NHS Track and trace should be used by all adults attending.
- All attendees to be phoned on the day before and asked about symptoms – and asked again on arrival – and form signed as part of the booking process.

## **Operational Arrangements COVID-19**

### **Professional/Practitioner Assessment of Risk from not being able to fulfil our normal duties**

See Appendix 1 for recording template in LCS/EHM. The YOS will continue to record rationale in any case where face-to-face meeting is not possible on Childview and the in-house Young Victims' Service case management system. It is also important to update PEPs with this information where appropriate.

An LCS/EHM Professional/Practitioner assessment of risk is required for visits where:

- we cannot fulfil our ordinary duties to children or families due to Covid19; or
- our ability to visit is reduced or prevented by Covid 19; or
- we or the child, young person or family cannot follow the guidelines of two metres social distancing during a visit; or
- we suspect someone with symptoms may be present in the household

Where a visit is required and social distancing cannot be assured, limited supplies of suitable PPE is available. However, the council's Public Health Team advice remains that if social distancing of at least two metres can be maintained PPE is not required. We must wear a face covering wherever required by law inside and may choose to do so at other times.

Where PPE is being used, colleagues need to be confident in its safe use and disposal – [guidance is available on The Source](#).

**For any child or young person where a visit cannot take place due to family self-isolating, symptoms or illness, family declining a visit a professional/practitioner assessment of risk must be completed and uploaded to the child's LCS/EHM record on the day the visit is due.**

- Each child who is allocated a practitioner and has an open plan of support will have an assessment undertaken that will determine the risk plan during the period when services to children and families will be reduced and/or families may be self-isolating/unwell. This risk management plan will include specific details on seeing the child and checking in on children's welfare and safety over this period. This will include new arrangements such as telephone calls and, potentially, video calls in place of face to face visits.
- Practitioners are to record visits as usual practice on the relevant recording system, but where visits are by virtual means during this period of continued risk from Covid -19, there will be the need to highlight changes to the visit record:
  - Was the child/young person seen? Select 'yes' if the child was seen by video or doorstep, select 'no' if the contact was undertaken by a phone call only.
  - If child/young person was not seen alone, please record reason of self-isolation or unwell if this relates to Covid-19

**All LCS/EHM professional/practitioner assessments of risk must be shared with your team leader and service leader and outline what is in place to mitigate any level of need/risk. It must also demonstrate the rationale for postponing the visit and demonstrate the offer of support through virtual/telephone contact with the family. If the postponement of the visit increases a level of risk to the child, consideration should be given as per normal practice standards to conducting a strategy discussion. For children who are subject to CP plans and children who we look after that cannot be seen in line with our statutory duties, management oversight must be added to the child's record.**

Children/young people and parents/carers are likely to experience heightened uncertainty and anxiety during this period. It will be important to maintain regular communication and contact and when visiting is not possible all children. Young people and families will receive regular wellbeing and welfare call from their allocated practitioner in line with their needs and impact of the virus as outlined in their LCS/EHM professional / practitioner assessment of risk.

**With reference to government guidance for infection prevention and control in respect of Covid-19 the following process will be followed:**

- Any decision made about the nature of support we offer to children at this time will be made after a robust analysis of indicators of current and future need or harm that might arise as a

result of the need for social distancing or additional pressures placed on individuals and families due to Covid-19.

- The DfE Coronavirus guidance for children’s social care services as updated in March 2021 is clear that:

*“The difficult and complex decisions that need to be taken during this period should be made in the spirit of the following principles:*

- *child-centred – promoting children’s best interests: nothing is more important than children’s welfare; children who need help and protection deserve high quality and effective support as soon as help is identified*
- *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”*

## **Child Protection Case Conferences and Children in Care Reviews**

### **Child Protection Case Conferences**

The ISRO (CP Chair) will contact the allocated social worker in advance of every conference to plan the best approach for the family. The conference may be held in one of the following ways:

- MS Teams and conference call
- Where appropriate and safe to do so the social worker, Parent(s), child(ren) and ISRO will meet in an office building for the conference and other professionals will be invited to join the case conference via MS teams or by conference call.

### **Children in Care reviews**

- All CiC reviews are happening virtually for all children/young people and families
- ISROs have been asked to maintain robust oversight of safety plans and contingency plans during the current pandemic.
- ISROs are undertaking face to face visits to children/young people when required, particularly where there is a concern with the care plan.

## **Family Time/Supervised Contact for children in care during COVID-19 Guidance**

This section sets out our approach to supporting children and young people in care to have meaningful and enjoyable contact/family time with those who are most important to them, in accordance with their contact plan, during the COVID-19 pandemic. It sets out our interim arrangements for supporting contact/family time during the current period, while social contact is restricted, and social distancing measures are in place across society.

Changes to current family time arrangements will be introduced gradually, and reviewed regularly, on a case by case basis. All changes to contact/family time arrangements and the rationale need to be agreed by the Team Manager and recorded on the child's case record and as a change to the child's Care Plan.

This guidance will be reviewed as needed when further government guidance is issued regarding changes in the restriction of activity and social distancing.

## **Family Time/Supervised Contact**

For many children on Care Orders and Interim Care Orders face to face contact has not taken place as frequently or at all since the commencement of lockdown on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020.

Allocated social workers, family time workers and carers have carefully planned each contact based on the child's needs **aiming on making this as creative, fun, meaningful and participative as possible.**

Virtual and where possible face to face contact/family time has worked well in many cases, with positive feedback and engagement from children and young people, parents and carers. We have learnt that there are some advantages with virtual contact/family time that we may well preserve for the long term, as part of a flexible approach to contact between children and their families. There are however, some groups of children and young people, and some individual circumstances where an absence of face to face contact/family time has been problematic, and is likely to inhibit the progression of the care plan and/or is having a significant impact on the emotional wellbeing of children. These groups include pre-school age children who are less able to understand and engage with virtual contact/family time, children with a care plan of reunification; children in care proceedings where parenting needs to be observed; some disabled children; children and young people who are experiencing placement instability; children and young people who have entered care since 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020. This list is not exhaustive and there will be other children's cases where individual circumstances mean that face to face contact/family time needs to be reintroduced sooner rather than later.

We are progressing through the easing of national government restrictions imposed on social contact. Schools and Early Years settings are now again fully open for all children..

Our approach needs to be flexible and to take into account the following principles:

- Although some, social contacts are still restricted, society has not 'returned to normal', and therefore we will not be able to resume the same frequency of face-to-face contact as was in place before the period of lockdown
- Any decisions about changes to family time arrangements must meet the child's identified needs, and be agreed by the appropriate Team Manager
- Where virtual contact/family time is working well, meeting the child's needs and fulfilling the child's care plan this should remain the default position, within the exemption being for babies under the age of 6 months for whom face to face contact/family time has continued
- Where face-to-face contact/family time is critical to the progress of the child's care plan then this should be facilitated where possible
- Where virtual contact/family time is not meeting the child's needs; in particular, some disabled children and young people, pre-school aged children and those children whose

emotional wellbeing has been negatively impacted by virtual contact/family time, physical contact should be considered and provided where safe to do so

- Where introduced, face to face contact/family time will take place between only two households at a time
- Careful case-by-case decisions will need to be made to ensure the needs and vulnerabilities of all parties are taken into account in decision-making, and decisions made that meet the needs of the individual child or young person

## **Managing face-to-face family time/contact**

- *Family time workers and allocated social workers will continue to use the risk assessment on each case and implement social distancing and hygiene practices to minimise risk.*
- *Contact/family time should take place outside, in the open air, where possible; consider using parks or open space close to the carers home; to reduce the need for transportation*
- *Where contact/family time must take place inside use larger rooms to enable social distancing*
- *Consider adjusting contact/family time plans to alternate between face to face and virtual contact/family time*
- *The rationale for decision-making to be clearly recorded on the child's case record / care plan*

Allocated social workers (or the Team Manager if the social worker is not available) are responsible for informing the child and parents of the new arrangements. There may be circumstances where it is better for the Family Time Worker to inform the child/parents, but this will be agreed by the allocated social worker and Family Time Worker

When contact/family time is taking place indoors, parents will be asked to take their own temperature, using a forehead thermometer strip or where available a non-contact InfraRed thermometer, before the contact/family time and if they show a high temperature the session cannot take place. All Children Centres and Child and Family Centres have supplies of thermometers and gloves and masks are also available for additional safeguarding if needed.

## **Section 20 and unsupervised family time/contact**

The principle of restricted social contacts applies to all children looked after under Section 20 and to children who are subject to Orders, but where contact is managed on an unsupervised basis.

As we don't hold parental responsibility for children under Section 20 and contact/family time arrangements are usually managed between the parent, child and carer, it is crucial that the child's social worker discusses contact/family time arrangements with the child and the parent and involves them in making decisions about the best way of them keeping in touch with each other and other family members. Most parents will understand the need to limit face to face contact and will be equally concerned to keep their child and other family members safe. Decision-making regarding contact/family time for children who are looked after with parental agreement will follow the same principles set out above.

If the parents do not accept the changes or restrictions to contact and this is causing strain on the foster placement, we may advise the parent that we cannot continue to look after the child under Section 20.

The same approach of seeking agreement to changes applies in cases where the child is on a Care Order and contact/family time is unsupervised, with the important difference being that we can insist on changes being made, if discussion with the child and parent has not been successful.

If the child has been having increased levels of contact/family time within a plan of return home both they and their parents may wish to bring the plan forward and wherever possible this should be supported.

## **Guidelines for working virtually with children and young people**

This section has been written to support colleagues in undertaking necessary changes in the way that we work because of the pressures and restrictions due to the Covid-19 outbreak and should be used as a point of reference for all Children's Services staff when working virtually with service users or other professionals.

As an organisation, North Somerset Council take very seriously the duty of care we have over the personal information we process, and we will always respect the rights and freedoms of the data subjects as laid out in law. We will use personal information only for the purposes for which it is collected, share it only with those whom we have said we will share it, and keep it only for as long as it is necessary to do so.

In response to the pressures and restrictions due to the Covid-19 outbreak, the Council has enabled the use of WhatsApp and other video conferencing software on Council devices to enable the virtually delivery of children's services.

Whether online or offline, safeguarding is everyone's responsibility and requires a whole organisation approach. For this reason, the following guidance is provided for communicating with young people virtually. Remember that you are professionally responsible for your communications and you could be asked to justify and potentially evidence any communications that you have with a young person. In addition, service users have rights under GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations). Freedom of information and subject access requests can be made at any time and if this is the case, then it will be up to the professional to provide the information. There is no visibility centrally of the information or its records.

This guidance refers to the following authorised communication channels:

- WhatsApp video calls and instant messaging
- Texting via the phone network
- Face time video calls (where enabled)
- Skype video calls
- Microsoft Teams video calls
- Zoom video calls

### **Voice notes**

Voice notes are not an authorised channel for communicating with children or young people. If a young person sends a voice note, discourage this and set a boundary to say that you are unable to engage in this form of communication.

Please note that if any applications generate other issues not covered by this guidance, then this matter should be escalated to your manager for consideration/decision.

### **Things to Consider When Working Virtually with a Young Person**

An online space needs to be a safe space. When working virtually with a young person, you should take the following considerations into account:



- Are young people in a shared or mixed space at home?
- Are parents/ carers aware that you are working with their young person?
- Does the young people have access to the required technology?
- Are data costs inhibiting for the young person? Do they have access to wifi?
- Is the young person/ parent/ carer technologically able to communicate in this way?
- Are young people able to control their environment? For example, can they switch cameras and mics on and off?

## **Consent and Safeguarding/Security Considerations**

- Only use your work phone and account for 'WhatsApp' telephone calls/ video calls, texting/instant messaging and video conferencing via zoom, Skype and Teams. Do not provide personal contact details.
- Before working virtually with a young person, it is important to ensure that you have their and their parent/carer's consent to work with them in this way. This should be documented in your case notes so that there is an official record of this happening.
- In asking for consent to engage using virtual discussions, the subject will need to be clear exactly what they are consenting to. This means that you will need to be clear about how the information on the call will be used both from a practise perspective and from a processing personal data perspective. You should tell them that they have certain rights under the DPA (Date Protection Act) and these are made clear in engagement documentation if they should wish to refer to them.
- We would always recommend that you encourage the young person to obtain consent from their parent/ carer. However, if the young person does not wish their parents to know that you are working with them and this is permitted (i.e. they are over 16 or deemed as competent according to Fraser Guidelines and over 13 years old) then this needs very careful consideration.
- It would be important to have a private discussion with the young person before working with them around their boundaries. Are they happy to have calls at home? Will the young person leave the house and go for a walk whilst on the phone?
- How will you ensure safeguarding if no one else knows you are calling the young person? In these cases, it might be more appropriate not to use video calling.
- All contacts should be saved in your address book to ensure that you are communicating with the correct person. Take care to make sure you are communicating with the correct person, especially if you have many similar names stored in your device's address book.
- Young people must be fully dressed when taking part in a session. They should not be in sleepwear.
- The parent/carer should always be aware that the call is taking place. You could contact them prior to the session to let them know the date and time of the session or speak to them at the start of the session.

- Sessions should not be held in the young person's bedroom. If this is the only place the call can take place, the door must be open and the parent/ carer must have consented to this.
- It is best practice to ensure that the door to the room that the young person is taking the call in should be left open. If the young person does not want to talk because they might be overheard, then it would be sensible to speak to their parents to request that they respect their child's privacy whilst on calls. Alternatively, if parents are happy to give consent for the door to be closed, this should be recorded in your case notes.
- Always be mindful of what you say over the phone. Listen carefully to tone of voice and look at facial expressions to monitor and 'check in' with the young person's wellbeing.
- Risk assess all video calls. Ensure that you do not leave yourself open to any allegations. Think about your clothing and the type of language that you use. Depending on the level of risk, video calling may not be appropriate. Discuss this with your manager if you have any concerns and ensure that these are documented in your case notes.
- You should make sure that there is no personal information in the background of a virtual meeting/ call that might be revealed to the service user. No pictures of children or other family members, for example. Teams and Zoom offer background images or a blur effect which is helpful in this respect. All contact needs to be recorded formally. Ensure you record all relevant outcomes confidentially so that there is a log of what was discussed.
- Consider disabling notifications to prevent messages coming up on your device's lock screen that could be visible in a public space.

## **Recording calls**

- It is possible to record Zoom and Teams calls however our advice is not to do this. If you have a legitimate reason for a call/virtual meeting to be recorded, you should discuss this with your manager first. If you are given permission to record a call, then you need to tell the person at the other end that you will be recording and gain consent.
- If you are involved in a call/ virtual meeting and someone starts to record it, you should stop the meeting and challenge it. It may be appropriate, it may not, but it is important to be transparent.

## **Guidance on Texting/ Instant Messaging**

- Whilst we appreciate that texts are often a preferred method of communication, we should not be encouraging its use as it is not secure. Where possible, phone conversations, emails or visits (when allowed) are preferable.
- It is important to remember that texts and instant messaging do present a potential GDPR issue, and any messages you send relating to council business are subject to Freedom of Information and Subject Access Requests under the Data Protection Act.
- In the event of a complaint or investigation that relies on evidence contained in messages on your work or personal device, you would need to be prepared to enable access to your device (and messages), in order to aid such investigations.

- As already mentioned, texting/ instant messaging should not be the normal way of communicating with young people that we work with. If this is becoming the case, then you need to have a conversation with the young person to set boundaries in place to move away from this pattern.
- The content of all texts should be recorded in your case notes as a formal record. Having the text record on your phone is not enough.
- You should not send personal information via text, even if the young person/ parent sends it to you through text.
- Personal data or information relating to a young person, or their family including names, addresses, age, offence details etc. should only be communicated via telephone or through the secure email facility.
- You should only text a phone that you have confirmed the identity of first. This means you should have spoken to the young person/ parent/carer on that number first.
- Names should not be used in a first contact text. This is when data sharing errors are most likely to be made. However, first names can be used to communicate with a parent/young person once they have engaged and are working with you.
- Numbers of young people/ parents/ carers should be saved in your phone contacts so that you are not messaging anonymous numbers.
- All text conversations should be kept on phones i.e. don't delete messages as you go. You should open a previous text to reply. This should prevent a possible scenario of someone sending a text to the wrong person. It is also a record of your contact with the young person. Once you have finished working with the young person, you can delete the entire conversation as long as you have recorded its contents into your case notes. Be aware of the FOI requests (Freedom of Information) and the possibility of SARs. (Subject Access Requests). If an FOI or a SAR is made then it will be up to the professional to provide the information.

## **Structuring Video or Telephone Sessions**

- Try and arrange for contact to be at a pre-arranged set time. Try to avoid 'ad hoc' communication.
- Keep your sessions to a set length of time and communicate this to your young person so that they know what to expect.
- Send any resources you might want to use in advance via email/ 'WhatsApp' so that they can review them and have them ready.
- Have a discussion with the young person around the boundaries of working virtually when you start working with them. For example:
  - What do you expect from them in a session? Before/after the session?
  - Do they need paper and a pad handy?
  - They should be fully dressed.

- They should be able to give you their full concentration (For example, not having a friend in the room at the same time as a session, not doing anything else at the same time e.g. Gaming/social media etc.)
- Have a chat about what might happen if they get upset or hang up the phone. What should they expect you to do?
- What will happen if they do not attend their appointment? Or if they are late?
- Try to follow a set structure in your sessions and communicate what this will be to your young person. This will help to familiarise them with what to expect and can help alleviate anxiety regarding future sessions. Starting and finishing in the same way each time can help to ground the young person and stabilise any new anxieties.
- Start sessions with a 'check in'. Reflect on how the week has gone- any positives and any challenges? Enquire about the health of their family. Reflect on last session. You might feel that a regulation activity is helpful.
- Be clear about the objectives for the session- what do you hope to achieve? What do they want from your time together?
- Be mindful of how you end the call. It is important to ensure that the young person is not left feeling anxious or under distress. Consider having a fun/ calming/ regulation activity or routine that you complete at the end of each session to help 'reset' the young person's state of mind.
- At the end of the session, remind them of the next session date and time and remind them of any positives from today's work.

## **Guidance on Group Messages/Telephone and Video Calls**

- Avoid taking part in group video/ telephone calls with young people on 'WhatsApp'. This will potentially be a safeguarding risk, as the young people on the video call will then have other young people's numbers. In this instance, perhaps use a video conferencing service, such as Zoom. (It is possible to hide participants email addresses on Zoom to maintain confidentiality.)
- If you are an instant messaging group administrator, take great care when selecting the membership of the group, and review the membership regularly.
- Think about what is manageable and constructive number in any one online group? Can you or should you mix different age groups online?
- Do keep a register of participation, including those who arrived early or late.
- Have two staff online for group video calls, if this is possible.

## **Ensuring Self-Care When Working Virtually**

- Make sure that you set boundaries with yourself and your work phone. Only have your work phone on in work hours.

- Ensure privacy is switched on and read receipts are not enabled on 'WhatsApp' (see below for help with this).
- Manage young people's expectations about when you will respond to their messages. It might be sensible to remind them that you are not an emergency service and that you will not immediately reply to messages.
- Give your young person relevant support groups, numbers or websites etc. that can be contacted outside of work hours or for further support.
- Ensure you are familiar with the correct route to escalate any concerns you might have following a virtual meeting with a young person.
- Make sure your young person has an up to date safety plan if needed and have people, organisations and alternatives that they can contact.
- Consider scheduling a set time to reply to texts into your diary so that you do not feel a pressure to reply immediately.
- Take breaks to 'reset' yourself between calls. Try not to book calls 'back to back'.
- Consider having a sensory box to help regulate yourself before and after sessions.
- Talk to your team and/or manager if you feel that communications are getting too much. This is especially important when working from home.

## **Security Settings**

- Don't allow anyone else, including family members, to use your device.
- Ensure a passcode or fingerprint is required to unlock your device, and for it to lock out after a short period of not being used.
- Switch on any additional security settings where available, such as two-step verification.
- Separate your social groups on instant messaging from any groups that share clinical or operational information.
- Unlink 'WhatsApp' from your photo library (this can be done in settings).
- Anonymise your 'WhatsApp'. Amend your privacy settings so it doesn't show read receipts or the last time that you were online. This is to prohibit a dependency on you to provide immediate responses and to prevent serial messaging throughout the day.

## **How to anonymise 'WhatsApp':**

1. Click onto your WhatsApp settings (found at the bottom of the screen on the right-hand side).
2. Click onto 'account'.
3. Click onto 'privacy'.
4. Then click onto 'last seen'.

5. Click on 'nobody'.

### How to turn off your read receipts on 'WhatsApp':

1. Follow points 1- 3 as above.
2. When in privacy under 'read receipts', click on this icon, where the background colour should be white and not green. The white circle needs to be on the left side.

### Important information about WhatsApp

There are some important data protection considerations regarding the use of instant messaging services such as WhatsApp, which staff need to be aware of when using WhatsApp:

- By installing the app, all contacts on that phone are accessed by 'WhatsApp'. Without the consent of all of the phone's contacts to use their data in this way, it may not be lawful.
- Its use can often result in the transfer of data outside the UK and European Economic Area where it may not have the protection of the GDPR or Data Protection Act.
- There is no ability to obtain message logs or history of events from 'WhatsApp' if needed, unlike text messages, where records can be obtained from mobile phone companies.
- WhatsApp conversation content is encrypted end to end and Facebook is not able to decrypt it. However, the end to end encryption doesn't apply to group calls though.
- WhatsApp in Europe is hosted in Ireland which makes it easier under the DPA, however this may change following the UK's exit from the European Union. WhatsApp is hosted in the US and owned by Facebook, and decisions they make about how information is shared between the two platforms could have a serious impact on any council information held within the WhatsApp service.

Subject	Operational Arrangements - COVID-19
Date	12/04/2021
Version	7.1
Authors	Shelley Caldwell, Cate Sampson, Carolann James, Claire Bowers, Mike Newman

**Appendix 1 - LCS/EHM Risk Assessment  
Exceptional Response to Children and Young People  
during COVID-19 Outbreak**



Name of Child:	
LCS ID Number:	
Age of Child:	
Status of Child:	
Is this a statutory visit:	Yes                      No
What is the date of compliance:	
Is this visit deemed essential?	Yes                      No
Is the household virus free?	Yes                      No
Is anyone else in the house have a vulnerable health condition?	Yes                      No
Reason for postponement of visit:	
Potential impact on child of not being seen:	
Are there alternatives to face to face?	Risks and strengths -
Managers comments /Agreed Plan	
Review Date	

## **Appendix 2 – Guidance for transporting children and young people in practitioner’s cars**

The following guidelines should be followed by all practitioners when transporting children and young people in their own vehicles.

### **Infection Control**

- Practitioners should ensure they have with them hand sanitiser, disinfectant cleaner and paper cloths / wipes etc.
- Practitioners must wash their hands for 20 seconds before entering the vehicle and frequently throughout the day where facilities are available, using hand sanitiser when washing is not possible.
- Surfaces in vehicles must be cleaned before and after use to transport a child or young person, especially frequently touched hand contact surfaces e.g. handles, seat belts etc.
- Ensure that you sneeze or cough into a tissue during the journey throwing it away and then washing or sanitising your hands.
- Avoid touching your face during the journey
- Ensure you have a small rubbish bag available for the safe disposal of tissues, cleaning cloths etc.
- Ensure the child or young person has all their belongings with them when they leave the vehicle at the end of each journey.
- You and any passengers must wear a face covering throughout the journey.
- Driver and passengers must sit at the maximum distance possible in the vehicle and open windows to give good ventilation and passenger(s) face away from others whilst in vehicle. The air recirculation system must be switched off.
- No food or drink should be consumed during the journey.

### **In the event of an emergency or breakdown**

- The driver and Passenger must ensure Social Distancing from each other and from the emergency responders except if they are in a dangerous situation on the highway.
- If the vehicle is serviceable and third parties (eg. mechanic or recovery contractor) have accessed the vehicle, then internal surfaces must be cleansed before journey is resumed.
- If the driver and/or passenger is transported by a recovery vehicle, all social distancing requirements should be observed.



### Appendix 3 – Alternative Venue Contact Details

CENTRE	NAME OF CONTACT	CONTACT DETAILS	EMAIL
Ashcombe Children Centre	Donna Haines	07825 341279	<a href="mailto:donna.haines@n-somerset.gov.uk">donna.haines@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Healthy Living Centre	Denise Payne	07825 341299	<a href="mailto:denise.payne@n-somerset.gov.uk">denise.payne@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Oldmixon Family Centre	Deborah Phillips	07881 267459	<a href="mailto:deborah.phillips@n-somerset.gov.uk">deborah.phillips@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Weston Central	Donna Haines	07825 341279	<a href="mailto:donna.haines@n-somerset.gov.uk">donna.haines@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Worle Library & Children Centre	Nicky Stead	07769 163926	<a href="mailto:nicky.stead@n-somerset.gov.uk">nicky.stead@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Castle Batch	Nicky Stead for Mon-Fri, 9am – 5pm	07769 163926	<a href="mailto:nicky.stead@n-somerset.gov.uk">nicky.stead@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
	The Campus for Mon-Fri after 5pm	01934 427427	<a href="mailto:campus@n-somerset.gov.uk">campus@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Locking Castle (The Campus)	Madeline Williams for Mon-Fri 9am – 5pm	07584 607216	<a href="mailto:madeline.williams@n-somerset.gov.uk">madeline.williams@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
	The Campus for Mon-Fri after 5pm	01934 427427	<a href="mailto:campus@n-somerset.gov.uk">campus@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Nailsea & Backwell	Natalie Hawtin	07385 373123	<a href="mailto:natalie.hawtin@n-somerset.gov.uk">natalie.hawtin@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Portishead (St Barnabas)	Suzanne Thorne	07775 406579	<a href="mailto:suzanne.thorne@n-somerset.gov.uk">suzanne.thorne@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Clevedon (The Barn)	Jenny Kingston	07500 125679	<a href="mailto:jenny.kingston@n-somerset.gov.uk">jenny.kingston@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Yatton Library & CC	Jenny Kingston	07500 125679	<a href="mailto:jenny.kingston@n-somerset.gov.uk">jenny.kingston@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Yeo Valley (Congresbury)	Jenny Kingston	07500 125679	<a href="mailto:jenny.kingston@n-somerset.gov.uk">jenny.kingston@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Somerset Hall	Joanne Cridge Drinkwater	01934 428284	<a href="mailto:joannecridge.drinkwater@n-somerset.gov.uk">joannecridge.drinkwater@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Bay Cafe	Joanne Cridge Drinkwater	01934 428284	<a href="mailto:joannecridge.drinkwater@n-somerset.gov.uk">joannecridge.drinkwater@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
Tropicana	The Campus	01934 427427	<a href="mailto:campus@n-somerset.gov.uk">campus@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>
The Campus	The Campus	01934 427427	<a href="mailto:campus@n-somerset.gov.uk">campus@n-somerset.gov.uk</a>