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

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

**Review Date: 31st March 2021**

**Authorised by: Northamptonshire Children’s Trust; Emergency Planning Arrangements.**

**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 Children In Care family time or contact safely during the current Covid crisis. Contact and family time has, since March 2020 been taking place between a combination of face-to-face and virtual family time. This 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 restrictions are being gradually lifted in line with the government Road Map. This policy has also been updated following the updating DFE Guidance on Court Ordered Contact dated 23rd March 2021; which states that Face to Face Family Time should be offered to children and families; unless a member of a household is clinically vulnerable and virtual contacts should then be provided.

1.4 Government guidance permits for the continued contact between 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.

The Contact Service have been working closely with the Social Work Teams for all face to face family time to be reintroduced from 31st March 2021. From 8th March 2021, there has been a staged approach and initiated started with providing one face to face contact per child per week. When contact arrangements have resumed 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**

* 1. Family time/face to face contact will be offered on the following basis;
* 5 venues are currently being used for contact.
* 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 4 households meeting at any one time, this is inclusive of the contact supervisor representing one household
* Parents must sign a 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. The Children In Care Service have learned a great deal during all of the national lockdowns; around how family time and relationships can be supported through virtual applications. This practice can support relationships between family members and also improve a child’s sense of identity.

**3. Arrangements**

3.1 It is the Contact Service’s responsibility to ensure there is a current 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 as 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 needs to be prevented.

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.

* 1. Face to face contacts to resume for all children by March 31st 2021 as long as it is deemed safe to do so. Contact supervisors to liaise with Social Worker and Carers to identify any changes or identified risks or shielding needs.
  2. Face to face contacts with more than 4 households will be looked at on an individual basis and the Team Manager will liaise with the SW to discuss the safety of these contacts going ahead in a safe manner. Larger contact venue rooms to be used to maximise social distancing.
  3. Each contact arrangement will be subject to a risk assessment. If the assessment indicates a high risk to the staff, family or child then virtual contacts will continue. If the decision is made that face to face family time will not be offered to a family/children then the SW, IRO, Children’s Guardian will be consulted with.

**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.