The Fostering Network

Coronavirus webinar

Contact arrangements for fostered children:

learning from lockdown and moving forward

25 June 2020

We will begin at 10:30am

Introduction

- The Fostering Network's response to lockdown
- Capturing the experiences and views of all those involved in fostering
- Responding to the needs of the sector
- Influencing change

Webinar aims

- Challenges and benefits of contact arrangements during lockdown

- Issues arising from lockdown restrictions being eased

- Collaborative approach

Agenda

- **Contact during lockdown: how are children and their birth families keeping in touch?** Ruth Copson, post-graduate researcher, University of East Anglia

- **The Fostering Network's practice resources on contact**, Judy Bell, Practice Consultant, The Fostering Network

- Breakout sessions

- Feedback and questions

Contact during lockdown: how are children and their birth families keeping in touch?

Beth Neil, Ruth Copson, Penny Sorensen

Centre for Research on Children & Families

Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

University of East Anglia

Research questions

How is birth family contact for children in care, children in kinship care, and adopted children being facilitated?

What experience do people have of using digital media to facilitate contact, and how well is this working for everyone involved?

Who took part?

23 telephone interviews with:

- 16 social work/social care professionals
- 4 birth parents
- 2 foster carers
- 1 adoptive parent

Online survey (n=197):

- 63 foster carers; 56 professionals; 37 Kinship carer/special guardian; 15 birth parents/other relative; 14 Other carers 11 Adoptive parents; 1 Young person

'Face-to-face contact has been cancelled until further notice'

Video calls
- Mediated or unmediated
- Just talking or play/activity based
- Same frequency or more often
- Not used much in adoption

Phone calls & messaging
- Teenagers with own phone
- Carers sending photos/video to 'fill the gap'
- Some concerns about sharing numbers

Face-to-face family time
- Very rare
- Teenagers may 'vote with feet'
- Compelling needs
- 2 metres 'social distancing'

Key Issues

- A means of maintaining connections with family and peers – *'a reasonable alternative under the circumstances'.*

- Responses to the change dependent on:

- Age of child, individual needs, previous experiences, existing relationships.

- Babies – limited benefits, less effective and appeared confusing - *'The baby doesn't really understand why he can hear Mummy but can't work out where she is'.*

- Teenagers - A more familiar form of communication - *'They are so used to doing everything not face-to-face anyway. It's the way they communicate with their friends'.*

- Lack of the sensory experience – *'It left him feeling the loss of her hugs.'*
- Children with disabilities – difficult for some, surprisingly beneficial for others.
- 'Safe space' - could be a cause of distress but for others '[*It's] taken the emotion out of contact'.*
- Integration of both families – sharing of space and important relationships.
- More time to build relationships with carers, less disruption to routines.
- Keeping children engaged – creativity is key!

Experiences of Carers

Key Issues

- Increased demands and responsibilities – adapting but struggling at times.

- Carers' generally focused on the wellbeing of the child.

- Lack of support and guidance from professionals and 'being left to it'.

- Relationships with parents – *'It has also enabled us to have a little 'window' into their life, environment and lifestyle and given us and contact workers a chance to see how they are living and interacting with each other.'*

- Maintaining confidentiality and managing risks, particularly when not supervised.

- Some liked having more control, or wanted more but were frustrated by professionals' preventing this.

- Managing children's reactions.

- Managing contact alongside other pressures e.g. family commitments, home education, work etc.

Key Issues

- Increased anxiety and distress - *'I'm always scared. I can't sleep and some days I can't even eat. I'm constantly thinking what if they get sick'.*

- Understanding and acceptance *'It keeps everyone safe doesn't it?'*– but some angry and frustrated.

- Pleased to see children via calls, but missed physical touch - *'I miss him more than ever. I didn't think it could get much worse'.*

- Access to wifi and equipment – 'digital poverty'.

Principles for promoting positive family links

- Keep the child's needs at the centre of planning for family contact time.

- Take into account the needs of birth family members and foster/adoptive/kinship family members.

- Look for opportunities to build trust, collaboration, empathy and a shared sense of goals between carers/adopters and birth relatives.

- Manage risk proportionally.

- Aim for family contact time to be rewarding, fun and child-friendly.

crcf Centre for Research on Children & Families

UEA University of East Anglia

Links to Reports

- **Full Report** - Neil, E., Copson, R., and Sorensen, P. (2020). Contact during lockdown: How are children and their birth families keeping in touch? London: Nuffield Family Justice Observatory/ University of East Anglia. Available HERE.
  Briefing Paper - Neil, E., Copson, R., and Sorensen, P. (2020). Contact during lockdown: How are children and their birth families keeping in touch? Briefing paper. London: Nuffield Family Justice Observatory/University of East Anglia. Available HERE.

- **Evidence Review** - Iyer, P., Albakri, M., Burridge, H., Mayer, M. and Gill, V. (2020). The effects of digital contact on children's wellbeing: evidence from public and private law contexts. Rapid evidence review. London: Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. Available HERE.

Covid-19 contact arrangements:

checklists for foster carer and fostering services

Judy Bell

Practice Support Team

Why the checklists?

- Inquiries to our member helpline and via our Practice Support Team

- Build on the work of the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory

- Sector requesting guidance on how to approach decisions around contact

Support for our members

The Fostering Network has a [member helpline](#):

- Tel: 020 7401 9582 or
- email: info@fostering.net

Membership engagement officers:

- North of England: Fiona MacNeil fiona.macneil@fostering.net

- SW and W Midlands: Amy Wilson on amy.wilson@fostering.net

- London, SE & East: Ellie Henderson ellie.henderson@fostering.net

Practice Support Team (PST)

PST provides specialist practice support and expertise to member fostering services in England, promoting excellence in fostering.

Go to our PST webpage for further information and an interactive map showing forums in each region.

Keith Miller

Judy Bell

Maria Chase

Sab Jagpal

Joanna Adande

Diane Heath

Kim Harris
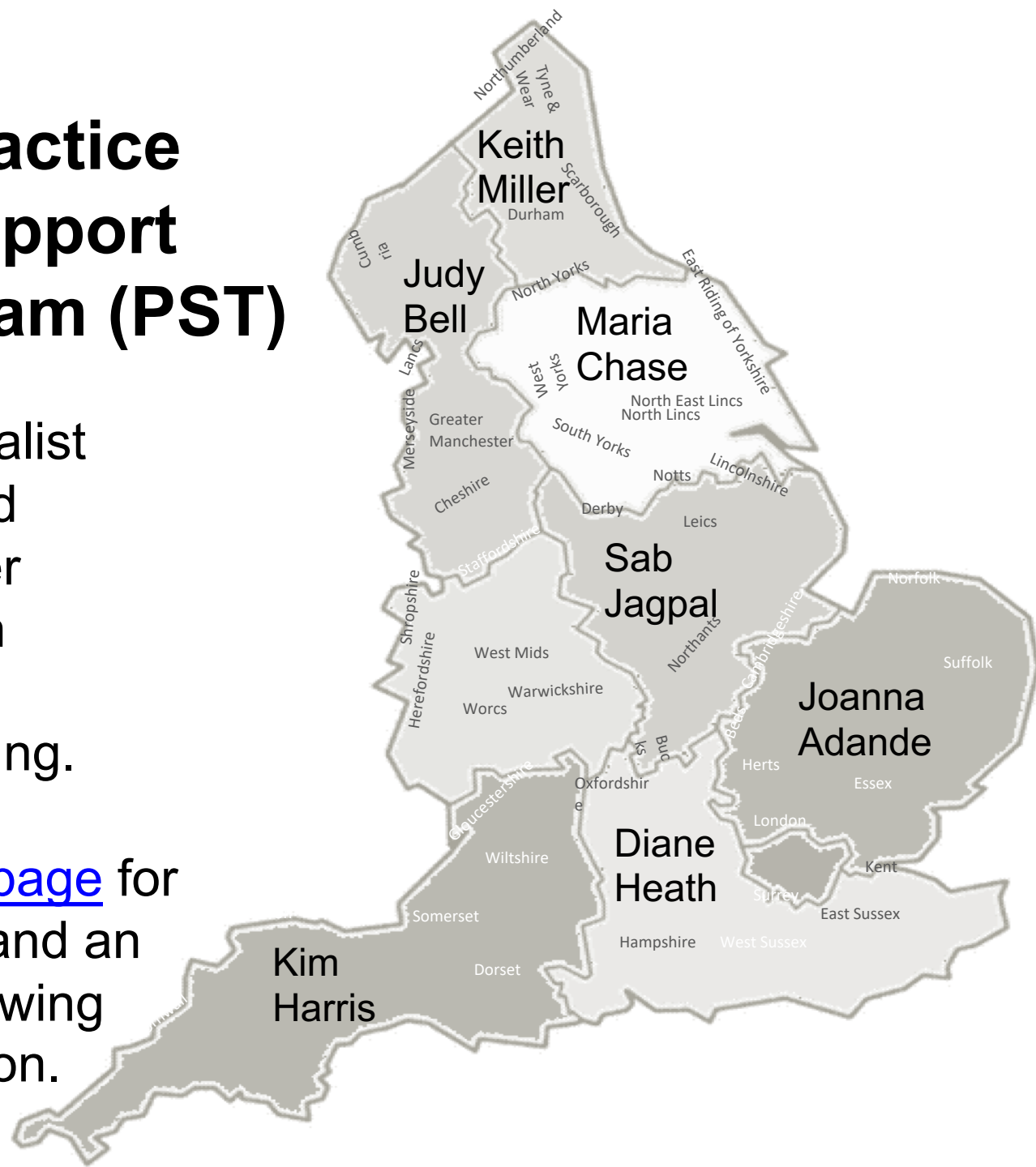
Some enquiries we have received. . .

Covid-19 contact arrangements

Covid-19 contact arrangements: Foster carer checklist
https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/content/covid-19contactarrangementssocialworkerchecklist.pdf

Covid-19 contact arrangements: Social worker checklist
https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/sites/www.fostering.net/files/content/covid-19contactarrangementsfostercarerchecklist.pdf

Breakout sessions

1. What has been the benefits/challenges of contact during lockdown?

2. What are you addressing now in relation to contact as lockdown restrictions are easing?

3. What support do you feel you need in making these decisions?

Feedback and questions

Thank you

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