



Covid-19 contact arrangements: Foster carer checklist

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected everyone's lives and, in line with the government's 'stay at home' public health requirement, the majority of face-to-face contact between children and their birth family and friends was suspended. Foster carers adapted quickly and have embraced alternative ways of delivering contact with enthusiasm, creativity and dedication to make sure children can still maintain links to those important in their lives.

Now, with the beginning of the easing of lockdown, which is happening at different speeds in the different countries across the UK (read the guidance for [England](#), [Northern Ireland](#), [Scotland](#) and [Wales](#)) contact arrangements for children are being reviewed, including exploring whether face-to-face contact could be resumed, where safe and in the best interests of the child. There is an opportunity to retain elements of virtual contact which have been used and gone well during lockdown.

Understandably this may be an anxious time for foster carers and the children they are caring for and there is a lot to consider to ensure resuming face-to-face contact is safe for everyone involved.

This will be a challenging task for social workers, and many are already grappling with the issues it presents. They will have to consider not only the child's needs, wishes and feelings and those of their birth families, but also that of the foster carers and their household members, some of whom have greater vulnerability to and/or anxieties about Covid-19 and its potential impact on them, their wider family and social network. While the circumstances and views of foster carers should always be considered when planning contact, Covid-19 makes this all the more important.

A fostering service has a duty of care to foster carers and their household in how the needs of the child are met. As well as this document, The Fostering Network has developed a 'things to consider' document for social workers to use when reviewing the contact plans for children in foster care. It is hoped that by working together and using the two documents, a plan for contact can be agreed by the 'team around the child'.

This checklist is designed to help foster carers think about what they need to consider, and questions they may need to ask their fostering service, in any contact planning being made for the child. Importantly, it will also help foster carers to have productive conversations with their fostering service and social workers if preparing to resume face-to-face contact. The points are

structured around the key principles of contact outlined in Neil's research for the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory on contact during lockdown¹.

Some children/young people may be in touch with an independent visitor which often compensates for them not having any family contact. The checklist below can be equally as useful for independent visitors and act as a guide of things to consider if being asked to resume contact.

The child's perspective

Principle

Keep the child's wishes, feelings, strengths and short and long-term needs at the centre of planning for family contact time.

- What has been the child's experience of Covid-19 and the lockdown and how have they responded to this physically, mentally and emotionally?
- Have you had any conversations with the child (according to their age and understanding) about their thoughts, feelings and wishes towards contact during and post Covid-19 and the lockdown?
- How has the child responded to any change or new ways of keeping in touch with their birth family?
- Who and what has supported the child at this time and has their experience changed the way they view their relationships and what is important to them?
- Has the child's expectations changed about regularity of contact if there has been increased frequency (albeit shorter) contact during 'lockdown'? Should re-established contacts be shorter/longer to help the child re-adjust?
- Has the child's social worker been in touch to obtain the wishes and opinions of the child?
- Do you have any thoughts about the child's contact arrangements moving forward post-lockdown when they are reviewed?
- Are there elements of virtual contact used during the lockdown you feel should be retained and incorporated because it had a positive impact on the child? Do you have the right equipment to do this?
- Could there be a mixture of face-to-face and virtual during the easing of restrictions and perhaps beyond?
- Have you fed your thoughts above back to the child's social worker and the wider team around the child?
- Are there other foster children in the household whose needs must be considered in reviewing contact arrangements? Are you and your supervising social worker in touch with the children's social workers for those other children to ensure planning and decision making for each child is joined up and avoids tension within the fostering household as far as is possible?

¹ Neil E, Copson R, Sorensen P [Contact during lockdown: How are children and their birth families keeping in touch?](#) (Nuffield Family Justice Observatory/University of East Anglia, 2020).

Foster carer's Covid-19 experiences and feelings

Principle

Take into account your own needs, wishes, feelings and strengths.

It is useful to think and reflect on your own Covid-19 and lockdown experience, and that of your family, as undoubtedly this may influence any views, anxieties and worries you might have with the easing of lockdown and resuming face-to-face contact. Depending on your thoughts to the questions below, be sure to let your fostering service know any relevant information and ensure they consider this when making any decision around reviewing contact arrangements.

- What has been your experience, and that of your wider household, family, social and support network of Covid-19 and the lockdown?
- Have you, or anyone in your household, fallen seriously ill with Covid-19 and how has this affected you?
- Have you been impacted by bereavement associated with Covid-19 and how has this affected you?
- What have been your observations in relation to the child and contact during the Covid-19 lockdown – what has worked well and what has caused difficulty or distress? Have you talked to your child about their contact experience during lockdown? Have you fed this back to the child's social worker?
- What has been your own experience of supporting virtual contact with your foster child? What were the pros and cons? Any particular challenges?
- What, if any, is your level of anxiety around the risks of Covid-19 infection and face-to-face contact and what support have you had/might you need with this?
- Has your fostering service produced any guidance to help you with the reintroduction of face-to-face contact?
- What are your expectations and understanding in regards supporting and promoting contact? Will contact be supervised or unsupervised? Are you being asked to supervise contact? Have you done this before? Do you feel comfortable with this role? Do you need any training before you might feel comfortable supervising contact? Are there any safeguarding risks to you and/or the child if contact is supervised by the foster carer rather than a social worker or contact work? Express and explore any concerns you may have, including those relating to Covid-19 with your supervising social worker. What can be put in place to mitigate risk or address your concerns?
- For many foster carers their role in supporting and promoting contact has changed dramatically during the Covid-19 pandemic with many becoming the facilitators and supervising the contact session. Some foster carers have found it a challenge managing contact, including challenges with boundaries and confidentiality. Do you need any additional training and support to help with resuming face-to-face contact? If aspects of virtual contact continue, do you need any additional training and support, particularly with IT and social media apps. Is this training available and accessible? Do you have all the right equipment to facilitate virtual contact?

Your family's experiences of covid-19 and feelings about resuming contact

Principle

Take into account the needs, wishes, feelings and strengths of your family members.

- Has anyone in the fostering home received a shielding letter from the Government?
- Do you or anyone in your household have any underlying health conditions or regarded as 'vulnerable'?
- Do you have any caring responsibilities outside of fostering that need to be taken account of?
- If any of the above applies, does your fostering service know about this?

The birth family's experience

Principle

Take into account the needs, wishes, feelings and strengths of the birth family.

- How do you think the child's birth parents/siblings/other family members/friends have found the virtual contact experience?
- What do you know about the birth family and their understanding of Covid-19 and preparations they have made to resume face-to-face with their child? Do they understand the seriousness of the social distancing rules and personal hygiene? Do you know if the child's social worker has talked to them about this?

Gathering information and practical Covid-19 considerations

Principle

Consider on an individual basis what risks there might be and make plans to manage these proportionally.

Below is a list of questions which might help structure conversations with your fostering service and social workers with contact planning and any decisions about resuming face-to-face contact. Communication between all those involved is key to successful planning and implementation.

- Where will contact take place? Inside or outside?
- Will you need to use public transport to get to and from contact? Will local authorities be willing to provide taxis to contact? Or contact escorts?
- Will you need to wait in council buildings or the contact centre while contact takes place? Will there be dedicated rooms that foster carers could wait in alone?

- What strategies have you got in place in order to maintain the social distancing rules when the child meets with family/friends at contact?
- Will there be a social worker or member of the contact centre present? If not, why? Do you think there should be?
- Should I wear PPE equipment when attending face-to-face contact? If so, who will provide that? Should/must I wear a face mask when at contact? Information on health risks associated with Covid-19 [available on the NHS website](#).
- Should the birth family wear PPE to contact? If so, who provides the PPE for them? Should/must the birth family wear a face mask when at contact?
- Should/must the child wear a face mask when at contact?
- Will our temperatures be checked when we arrive at contact?
- Will we need to take a Covid-19 test before and/or after each contact? The NHS website provides information about [how to ask for a test](#).
- What measures and changes have contact centres taken and implemented to ensure social distancing can take place and the risk of the virus is minimised? Alcohol gel? Screens? Face masks? Social distancing indicators? Has the room been sanitised prior to your contact session taking place? What hand washing facilities will be available? Will there be toilet facilities available and have they been properly sanitised?
- How many family members will be present at contact? Is this in line with the rules around social distancing and easing of lockdown rules?
- Has a 'virtual assessment' taken place prior to face-to-face contact to help answer some of the practical questions above?

Preparing the child

Principle

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

- How will you prepare the child for changes in contact arrangements and the social distancing requirements which will make contact look and feel very different for them? Would it be helpful for them to be sent a photograph of their family member wearing a face mask in advance of contact happening so they can be prepared as to what they look like?
- How can you make face-to-face contact as positive an experience as possible, and in turn not more upsetting/more traumatising when physical contact is not possible? This will of course be a consideration for all children, perhaps more so for those children where physical touch is so important in maintaining bonds, such as babies, children with disabilities who are non-verbal and/or non-mobile or children with other conditions who require physical touch for soothing purposes, also children who may not have an understanding of the risks of physical contact. There will be implications for all involved in contact - children, their parents and other relatives, sibling contact, as well as you the foster carer who the child returns to afterwards, with the child potentially being more distressed as a result.
- Have you thought about how to prepare the child if contact is cancelled at very short notice because, for example, someone falls ill with Covid-19, has to isolate (e.g. NHS Track and Trace service has contacted them) or someone presents with a temperature on arrival at contact and so contact does not take place. Foster carers are likely to already have experience of managing situations when family members may not show up to contact, however, given the unique and

lengthy preparations of resuming face-to-face contact due to Covid-19, particularly after such a long period in lockdown, it may need some extra thought.

- What authority has been delegated to you to make one-off changes in arrangements (perhaps due to sickness or having to isolate)? Be clear about the limits of this delegated authority and make sure that all parties understand what you can and can't agree to change.