

Factors to consider in regards to Covid-19 when resuming planned breaks for children in foster care

Planned breaks cover those breaks in the following definition:

- **Short term fostering which includes 'short break fostering' and 'respite fostering', when parents/carers and children are given a break whereby the child goes to temporarily stay with another carer for a short period of time.**

Introduction

When the coronavirus pandemic began and the countries of the UK went into lockdown, most planned breaks for children in foster care were stopped in accordance with public health guidance. As lockdown eases at different stages across the UK, we have outlined some considerations below to aid decision making to enable and support the resumption of planned breaks where it is in the best interests of the child, relevant and perhaps necessary.

Exploring what is available to best support a child's needs should be of prime consideration and confirmed in the child's care plan. Equally, any assessment of the child's needs should consider the support that a foster carer needs to enable them to provide the best care possible.

Decisions regarding planned breaks must be made on what is best now, in the current public health context, risk assessing in line with the current situation locally regarding Covid-19, and not based on much earlier decision making or long-standing arrangements. If a child or young person had regular planned breaks prior to the pandemic, or if it is in a foster carer's agreement that they are entitled to 'breaks', this should not necessarily determine a planned break for a child in the current context of Covid-19. In addition, foster carers, children and their fostering providers should have conversations to assess any new or emerging needs of all their fostering households as a result of the pandemic, as those who previously did not need support may now need it.

The impact of any planned breaks on the child must be acknowledged and paramount consideration given to what is in the best interests of the child. The voice of the child or young person, either directly or with the assistance of an advocate, should be central to these discussions and decisions.

Factors to consider

Exploring the range of support available

Due to public health guidance, we would encourage an exploration of the range of support available that may be an alternative to planned breaks and that can ensure that the health and wellbeing of children and carers is supported. For example, have regular babysitting arrangements been considered where a child remains in the foster carer's home, but the carers may have an evening out?

Risk assessments

Any decisions around planned breaks must be fully risk assessed. Discussions should be carried out by the fostering service taking into consideration views of the child, their birth family, the foster carer, fostering household, planned break carer, and child's social worker and include risk assessment of:

- What is the current national public health/government guidance¹? Are there additional local restrictions in place?
- What is the current local infection rate and associated local guidance on mixing of households?
- What is the child/young person's view of the proposed arrangement?
- What are the remainder of the fostering household's views?
- What are the views of birth family?
- What is the child's understanding of social distancing and personal hygiene practices and does the planned break carer have the ability to support them?
- What quarantine rules are in place for travel abroad and return?
- What is the capacity for extending provision of care should the foster carer need to quarantine upon their return?
- What contingency plans are in place in the event of the foster carer or child contracting Covid-19?

Clarity of purpose

- What arrangements had been built into the child's care plan? How, if at all, have these changed since the plan was made?
- What are the wellbeing benefits of the break for the child and for the carer?
- What are the child's expectations of the break and can these expectations be reached in light of certain government/local restrictions?

Child's health and wellbeing

- Does the child have any additional health needs? What impact will a break have on them, physically and mentally?
- What provisions need to be in place to maintain the child's health?
 - Is personal protective equipment (PPE) required? If so, who will provide this?
 - Is testing accessible should the child show symptoms? Is the foster carer aware of the requirements under Test and Trace should the child test positive?
- A child's ongoing care needs:
 - Is additional medication required at the planned break carer's home to minimise items being transported between households?
 - Is administering of child's medication clearly recorded? Has the planned break carer received instruction in the administering and recording of medication?

¹ In England, refer to the guidance for [meeting people from outside your household](#); in Northern Ireland, refer to the [Covid-19 regulations guidance: family and community](#); in Scotland refer to the guidance on [Covid-19 Phase 3: staying safe and protecting others](#); and, in Wales refer to the [guidance on leaving your home and seeing other people: coronavirus](#).

- Does the child use additional equipment or mobility aids, how can these be safely shared between households? What hygiene and cleaning measures need to be addressed for these items?

Supporting the transition for child

- Deep cleaning of planned break carer's house prior to welcoming child, such as wiping down of all surfaces, individual items allocated for the child including clothing, toys, and equipment such as bed linen, towels, crockery, cutlery and so on.
- The child is welcomed and made to feel safe and secure while supported with hygiene measures such as hand washing.
 - Is a temperature check required? If so, ensure that this can be carried out in a non-intrusive and fun way to ease anxieties for child.

Maintaining links with family

- How will the child maintain relationships with birth family and/or their foster carer while on a planned break?
 - Will this be face to face or virtual?
 - Has the planned break carer been communicated with about contact arrangements and agreed to do them face to face if appropriate?
 - What steps need to be in place to enable this to happen face to face while adhering to national or local guidance around social distancing, hygiene and PPE to minimise risk of transmission of Covid-19?

Transitioning back to educational settings

- Will the timing of the break coincide with the child's return to or attendance at school/other learning centre?
- What are the child's views about returning/attendance? Do they have any concerns or anxieties? How best can these worries be alleviated?
- Is this a return to a previous school placement, or will additional supports be needed to support a transition to a new and unfamiliar learning establishment?

Identifying support

- Has a planned break carer been identified?
 - Is the identified carer a part of the fostering household/wider fostering family?
 - Does the child have a pre-existing relationship with identified carer? Has the child previously stayed with this carer?
 - What are the health needs of the carer?
- What is the family situation of the identified carer?
 - Does the carer have other children or adults in the household who have health concerns to be aware of?
 - Are wider family members of the carer aware of the potential impact on their employment should any member of the household contract Covid-19, for example the need to self-isolate and possible loss of earnings.

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