

Interim arrangements for parental contact during Covid-19

Since the recent outbreak of Covid-19, Solihull Children's Services have worked tirelessly to ensure that children, young people, staff, foster carers and their families are as safe as possible whilst fulfilling our statutory duties. This has so far included but was not limited to;

- Limiting direct contacts to only take place between parents and siblings and no extended family
- Screening for symptoms of children, carers and family members to inform whether self-isolation needs to be triggered and contact suspended
- Increased stringent hygiene measures for staff and visitors to the contact centre, as well as increased cleaning of the contact centre.

Despite the above measures, concerns of those involved in this service (both providers and users) are extremely high due to the high volume of traffic and significant amount of physical contact related to direct contact. This involves various carers and workers transporting children between placements and contact venues and having to physically pick up and carry some children. There is then the added complexity of physical affection from parents such as hugging and kissing.

We have therefore had to carefully consider our approach to facilitating contact and how we can promote the safety and wellbeing of all those involved. Recognising the exceptional circumstances arising out of the current national public health emergency, and in line with the current government guidance, the following steps are now proposed in order for Solihull Children's Services to fulfil its duty of promoting contact, whilst ensuring a duty of care to service users and staff.

As of 24/03/2020 and for the foreseeable future, all face to face contacts will be suspended and replaced with virtual contact. This is in an attempt to promote social distancing and reduce unnecessary travel and gatherings. For those having contact at a frequency of once per week or more, we will seek to offer a virtual contact at a minimum of once per week. Contacts that are less frequent will be maintained at their current frequency. Cases will be considered and dealt with on a case by case basis and will have to take into consideration factors such as technology available and foster carer contribution.

We will be asking foster carers to take the lead in facilitating these video calls at the current day and start time of their current contact. The foster carers will be responsible for calling parents and supervising the contact and ensuring adherence to time keeping. They will maintain a log of this contact in terms of dates, times and content and ensure the logs are provided to the social worker. All foster carers will be provided with a template for this log.

Foster carers will not enter into any discussions with the parent to any other matters. Parents are not permitted to try and contact the foster carer. All communication from parents needs to continue to be via the allocated social work team. Should any parents wish to challenge this decision, they are encouraged to discuss this with their solicitor who will advise them accordingly.

Social workers will liaise with parents and carers on a case by case basis to agree durations of virtual contact but the following is provided as a general guide:

- **0 – 2 years old:** A video of the child will be sent to parents by the social worker, this is on the basis that a video call will not provide much opportunity for meaningful interaction between parent and child.

- **2 – 4 years old:** Up to 10 minutes in duration. If the child disengages with the call, the carer will seek to encourage engagement but if this cannot be achieved the call will be ended.
- **Infant school children (Reception – Year 2):** Up to 20 minutes in duration. If the child disengages with the call, the carer will seek to encourage engagement but if this cannot be achieved the call will be ended.
- **Junior school children (Year 3 – 6):** Up to 30 minutes in duration. If the child disengages with the call, the carer will seek to encourage engagement but if this cannot be achieved the call will be ended.
- **Secondary school children:** Up to 40 minutes in duration. If the child disengages with the call, the carer will seek to encourage engagement but if this cannot be achieved the call will be ended.

This arrangement will remain under constant review and considered in line with government guidance.

23rd March 2020