**SOUTH GLOUCESTERSHIRE COUNCIL**

**Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for staff in children’s social care.**

**Fostering**

**What happens to children living in foster care if foster carers are self-isolating or become ill?**

We recognise the importance of maintaining permanent, stable living arrangements for children wherever possible. In most cases, we expect that children will remain with their foster parents in line with the social distancing guidance Issued by the government and updated 31 May 2020

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing>

 Supervising Social Workers must maintain contact with their foster carers in order to monitor the safety and stability of all arrangements for children and their foster carers. They should raise with their line manager any instance of concern or where self-isolating or illness are causing a potential threat to the living arrangements.

**If a foster carer is in a vulnerable group, should the foster child continue to attend their educational setting?**

If a foster carer, or someone in their household, is in a vulnerable group, Supervising Social Workers should discuss the potential risks with them being mindful at all times of the PHE guidance and its application to essential workers like foster carers. They should ensure that these factors are taken into account when assessing, with the local authority Virtual Head Teacher, how the child’s need can best be met and whether attending education is in the best interests of the young person. In making this assessment they will want to have due regard to the situation in relation to other looked after young people living with the carer and/or the foster carers’ own children and whether they are attending school and whether doing so might single out the looked after young person unnecessarily. The objective for this assessment is to achieve what is in the child’s best interests. Where a child is judged to be vulnerable and at risk of harm due to not attending school the carer and young person should understand our expectation that they attend. Where the young person does not attend school for whatever reason this should be escalated via the Team Manager to the Service Manager, who will raise it at the weekly meeting of the Vulnerable Children in School Oversight Group.

Further guidance is available on [shielding and protecting people defined on medical grounds as extremely vulnerable](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19). Last updated 31 May 2020

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing> updated 31 May 2020

**What if there are not enough foster carers to care for children and young people who become looked after during this period or to provide respite for other foster carers who have become ill?**

We recognise that it might be challenging to provide additional respite for foster carers in this current climate. We are currently considering a range of measures which may assist in relation to short breaks, temporary approvals for foster carers and emergency placements, and ways to free up more space within existing foster homes to make it easier to identify potential placements and ensure new foster carers are assessed and approved without delay. We are developing a register of carers who may be able to offer a home to additional children via the use of a Variation to Approval terms or an Exemption to the usual fostering limit. We have also implemented measures which are designed to “fast-track” new prospective carer applicants by undertaking virtual visits and bringing them to the Fostering Panel for approval in a much shorter timeframe.

**We might need to recruit and approve more foster carers in the short term. What is being done to change the regulations related to fostering panels?**

We recognise that in time, particularly if the lock-down period and associated limitations extend beyond the short-term, we may need to bring in more emergency foster carers to help build capacity within the service. We are considering a number of ways in which to do this including targeted campaigns to education staff and childminders. Whilst we want to ensure that assessments and approvals are thorough and comply with regulations, we do not want this to be unnecessarily delayed. Under Regulation 24 of the Fostering Services (England) Regulations 2011, there is already sufficient flexibility for fostering services to convene remote panels and we are doing this.

**Can we change the number of children that a foster household can care for?**

Foster carer approval terms, including age range and number of placements, may need to be flexible in the current circumstances. Schedule 7 of the Children Act 1989 currently allows for some flexibility in placing multiple children together by allowing local authorities to grant exemptions to the usual fostering limit in specific placements (explained further in the [Assessment and approval of foster carers: Volume 4: Fostering Services guidance (2013))](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fostering-services-assessment-and-approval-of-foster-carers).

Where fostering services are concerned about capacity, they could start identifying potential fostering households that may be able to accommodate additional children and to have sensitive and appropriate conversations as part of their contingency planning. We are undertaking this exercise on an ongoing and dynamic basis. No fostering household will be pressured to take additional children into their home, but many will want to offer help and these families should be enabled to do so.

**Supporting carers to care for newly looked after young people who have tested positive for Coronavirus.**

Our aim is always to support young people to remain with their family or their wider network where it is safe for them to do so and this remains our position at the current time. However, we recognise that there may be some young people who need to become looked after and who have either tested positive for coronavirus or who may exhibit symptoms but who have yet to have a confirmed test. Where this happens, we will, as always, seek initially to find a foster carer to support and care for the young person. In the event we are able to find carers, we will liaise with our Public Health colleagues to undertake a risk assessment based on the carers needs and their family .about how to support them to care for the young person safely.; This will be impacted by the age of the young person and the level of direct care they require. We will then ensure they have access to the appropriate PPE.

NB For obvious reasons we advise that all current living arrangements for children are maintained, to avoid potential disruption and to avoid unnecessary health risks.

No 18 year old will be forced to leave their current home due to their age and other placement moves should be avoided. We will work with foster carers to ensure Staying Put arrangements are utilised to support young adults wherever possible.

Where requests are made we will continue to seek to use our in-house fostering resource as an option of first resort, through the use of variations, exemptions and newly approved carers.

Should we be compelled to look to the external market we have surveyed current providers, most of whom are still accepting referrals. A very small number of current providers have stated a willingness to accept referrals for children and young people with symptoms or a diagnosis of Covid 19 as they have the facility to effect isolation of the person for the relevant period. Placements staff will make any referral to these resources in the usual way.

For those young people leaving care we are seeking to maintain contact, provide a range of support including help with food, mobile phone cards and social activity including a virtual “drop-in”, online fitness sessions and Stay and Play sessions for young parents. We are also working hard to ensure that all providers of Supported Accommodation adopt the agreed “no eviction” policy to preserve a degree of continuity for our young people.

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