

RCJ Children Office  
Ann McMahon, Law Society of NI  
Louise Murphy, Family Bar Association  
Peter Reynolds, NIGALA

31 March 2020

Dear all

**Ref: COVID-19 Implications on Contact between Parents and Children**

I write to you regarding the interim changes to our service in respect of Looked after Children and Families that are currently subject to Interim Care Orders/Care Orders and the work undertaken by our Court Children's Service in private law court work. We are currently in the midst of unprecedented and uncertain times and there is an absolute need to keep safe and prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Like many health and social care professionals, I am concerned about the impact of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) on the well-being of our staff and the families that we provide a service to. Social Workers facilitating contact are not exempt from the current government restrictions. The Public Health Authority issued guidance on social distancing for everyone in the United Kingdom. The guidance is for everyone, including children. It advises on social distancing measures we should all be taking to reduce social interaction between people in order to reduce the transmission of coronavirus (COVID-19). To define social distancing, Public Health Authority advise the public to avoid gatherings with friends and family in public spaces, noting that restaurants, leisure centres and similar venues are currently closed as infections spread easily in closed spaces where people gather together and have recommended that we opt to keep in touch using remote technology such as phone, internet and social media.

The Children (NI) Order 1995 Article 3 states the welfare of the child is paramount and when we consider the welfare checklist in these specific circumstances, we fully endorse our duty of care to keep children and families safe as far as possible. Unfortunately, due to the public health emergency and guidance from the Public Health



Authority we have no alternative but to suspend all face to face supervised and facilitated contact between children subject of Interim Care Orders and Care Orders and their parents and families. This decision will remain subject to ongoing review in accordance with the guidance received from the Public Health Authority.

The next review of these arrangements by the Assistant Directors of Children's Services is scheduled to take place on Monday 20 April 2020. Following this review, the families involved will receive a further update on contact from the social worker.

In the interim period, some form of indirect contact is promoted. The child's social worker will liaise directly with each family to consider the following options:

- Skype
- Facetime
- Video Messaging
- Letters and Cards
- Zoom – video conferencing
- Any other agreed form of indirect contact

The family placement social worker will liaise with the foster carer to agree as to how facetime contact can be managed. For young people in residential care facilities including secure accommodation the field social worker will be liaising with the residential facilities to promote the indirect contact. In all cases the field social worker will remain the point of contact to co-ordinate these arrangements.

In respect of kinship carers the position is the same as for those children placed in foster care and indirect contact will be promoted.

Presently children who are availing of unsupervised direct contact the current position regarding contact will also apply to those families and indirect contact will be the preferred option.

A regional agreement was made on Monday 23 March 2020 in respect of the Court Children's Service whereby this service will not be taking on any new work and consideration is being given to Court Children's Officers supporting other front line services in the interim period. Any new referrals to the service will be placed on a waiting list. Correspondence has been circulated regarding the interim changes.

Finally, I am asking for your support throughout these difficult times.

Thanking you for your understanding and your commitment to ensuring that the children and families are kept safe during this difficult time.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Marie Roulston', written in a cursive style.

---

Marie Roulston  
Director Social Care & Children

cc: Paul Morgan, SHSCT  
Maura Dargan, NHSCT  
Deirdre Mahon, WHSCT  
Bria Mongan, SEHSCT  
Carol Diffin, BHSCT  
Brendan Whittle, HSCB  
Martin Quinn, HSCB  
Eilis McDaniel, DoH