

COVID-19 Virus Update: Interim guidance from CFAB on arranging full assessments overseas

Introduction

During the global pandemic of COVID-19, many social workers will be tasked with continuing their work remotely. This raises ethical and practical questions about how to safely arrange assessments of family members in other countries, which may be in varying stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. This interim guidance sets out some principles to govern practice in these unprecedented times. It specifically relates to the assessment of parents or kinship carers (also known as friends and family carers) abroad where face to face visits cannot be conducted.

Prepare for delays

Delays should be anticipated. Any organisation in a COVID-19 affected country will be doing additional work to ensure the safety of its staff and compliance with new regulations, so casework will take longer – particularly so if the country has restrictions of movement. Prospective carers may decline to receive home visits during this risky period not only for their own safety but also for that of an assessor.

Use of video technology can greatly expedite the work of social workers, particularly as a viability assessment to determine whether a potential carer should be ruled out or more thoroughly assessed at a later date.

Remote (phone or video) interview sessions are sufficient for gathering basic, concrete and factual information of the nominated potential carers, such as their accommodation and living arrangements (identifying who lives in the household), employment and income, health history, support network, local facilities, or establishing if a person is willing to participate or should progress to the further part of the assessment, which is so intricate that it is best to be done by meeting them in person.

A follow-up home visit will verify the information gathered through the remote interview, as well as address the areas of the assessment that require thorough observations, threading direct observation into the dialogues and analysing their non-verbal responses and reactions.

The limitations of a phone interview are clear: the interviewer cannot see the interviewee nor his/her surroundings. However, even with video technology there are potential limitations and risks of use as a sole tool to determine permanency of the child. These are outlined below.

- A. Due to the restricted screen coverage when using a video-link, it is difficult to make accurate observations of non-verbal communication signals beyond what the social worker is physically allowed to see or hear. The social worker may fail to notice subtle reactions or nuances in the interviewee's body language and facial expressions.
- B. It may also be difficult to perceive delicate emotional responses correctly. Careful observation of synchronicity between verbal and non-verbal responses is necessary to gauge complex human emotions and ultimately helps to determine whether the information that the interviewee provides is trustworthy or accurate, as well as measuring the emotional responses of the interviewee. It is not possible to be absolutely sure of what actually surrounds an interviewee i.e. whether the interviewee is in the room alone or with other persons, or if there are other persons present in a nearby room, or even whether the video link is being screened to others who might have an interest.

This can have a significant effect on an interviewee's responses, for example, if s/he were in an abusive or controlling relationship, they may not be able to express their views and opinions freely.

- C. Through the virtual dimension, social workers are limited to what they can see and hear and are entirely within the control of the interviewee. This limits the use of the senses that a social work assessor would usually apply in conducting an assessment. For example, smelling food-cooking, pets, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, or activation of other senses such as shoes sticking to the floor (indication of dirty floor / bad home hygiene) and feeling draught or damp (indication of cold home environment) and so on.
- D. Technical issues, for example a poor internet connection or the device malfunctioning may affect the quality of the observation or confuse the social worker with mixed or wrong messages. For instance, the social worker may struggle to differentiate the significance of a pause (hesitation to answer the question) with a delayed internet transmission or disturbance; or voice tremors (a sign of nervousness, distress or even anger) with the audio-device fault causing false sound-effect.
- E. There may also be risk of serious harm to the interviewee if the confidentiality of the information disclosed in the video link discussion were to become more widely known in the community due to legal or illegal access to the video

stream or as a result of a breach of confidentiality by any person with access to the process.

A face to face visit should always be conducted before a final decision is made to place a child with the carer

Whilst in some cases a virtual or remote assessment alone may provide significant and detrimental enough information to determine the option is not viable and the assessment to not progress further, in many cases a delay to the completion of work to wait for a subsequent home visit may be justifiable and appropriate when placing a child overseas. This is because once the child is placed outside the jurisdiction of the UK Local Authorities and courts, monitoring and supporting the overseas placement may not be straightforward as it would be in the UK. It is particularly important to be confident in the overseas placement as it is likely to be an 'untested' placement, as the child will not have had the chance to live with their potential carer. Additionally, such delays can be afforded (within reason) as the actual physical relocation of the child from one country to another will be hampered for some time, due to international travel bans or entry restrictions (i.e. quarantine upon arrival, entry visa approval, etc.). Social workers are advised to do as much preparatory work (immigration checks, viability assessments, practicality of mirroring a court order, preparatory support work with the potential carer, consideration of postplacement support, etc) in order to expedite cases as soon as the face to face visit can be concluded.

Where children are placed abroad, consideration must be given to whether support can be offered to avoid placement breakdown and what happens to the child if placement breakdown does occur.

The breakdown rate of overseas kinship care placements is currently unknown as local authorities are unable to track and analyse in aggregate the success or failure of overseas kinship placements. Although data is limited, CFAB has undertaken analysis of the good practice and challenges in overseas placements, noting the high placement rate and a family breakdown rate of circa 10%. While each family case must be considered on its merits, social workers should take into account the support services that are available to the child in the destination country and whether these need to be supplemented by further support from the UK.

Where possible, local experts should be involved

Best practice in international assessments is to work in collaboration with the authorities and professionals in other countries, making requests to local social workers abroad for any pieces of work to be completed within their country.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, it is even more important to work with local practitioners to best interpret reaction to the crisis in a culturally conscientious manner. For examples of how different nationalities/cultures are reacting to the pandemic, visit CFAB's website. In general, there are a variety of reasons why working with local practitioners is important. First, it is important to respect professional jurisdictions and recognise that local professionals are, in many ways, best placed to complete assessments in their territory. This is because local professionals are familiar with the relevant legislation and cultural environment. They also have a better understanding of the potential requirements of placing a child in their area and can advise on the appropriate support available to sustain the placement. Second, they are able to establish relationship to prospective carer especially if followed up by home visit. Such a relationship would be of considerable assistance if there are problems later requiring family support. Third, prospective carers will be able to speak in the native language, so the subtleties of their responses are not lost through interpretation. Finally, prospective carers are likely to be more willing to work with a local professional than a foreign one. For a wider explanation of why the use of local partners is essential, please read CFAB's factsheet.

The benefit to the child in using remote access technologies must be weighed against the risk the technology poses.

In most cases, the risk of making a final determination of placement of a child solely through use of remote technology is likely to outweigh the benefit to the child.

As of 07 April 2020, official advice is that restrictions of movement due to the COVID pandemic are a temporary measure. As such, placing a child with carers who have not been thoroughly assessed, to avoid delay, will leave the child in a potentially vulnerable and fragile situation in an overseas country where appropriate intervention or support may not be readily available. If restrictions in movement are to be longer-term, it anyway would be not possible to place a child abroad and therefore assessments of family overseas will need to be delayed or reconsidered.

Support CFAB is able to provide

We are committed to support the UK Local Authorities and courts, who are complying with 'COVID 19: National Guidance for the Family Court' (Issued 19th March 2020), as best we can through this urgent and unprecedented time. We will continue to closely observe how the situation will unfold in the next few months in the UK and elsewhere in the world in order to review our guidance in timely manner and

adjust our practice flexibly. Provisionally we have set to review this by the 1st June 2020 to adjust our practice accordingly.

Regarding assessments overseas, CFAB will continue to accept enquiries and requests from UK Local Authorities and courts as usual, although we expect delay in responses from some countries. In this exceptionally difficult situation all across the world, we are striving to adjust our way of working in the short to medium term, so that we can continue to provide our inter-country social work services, in cooperation with our overseas partners, even where direct contact is temporarily restricted due to social distancing, lockdown, and domestic travel bans. We will introduce a temporary approach of incorporating a remote interview session through use of technologies such as telephone, Skype, WhatsApp or other services as the preliminary part of the assessment.

This will be followed by a home visit later to make it a full comprehensive assessment, presuming the restrictions would be lifted in the next few months and direct contact will be safe for both our overseas service providers and the persons subject to assessments. CFAB will assess risks case by case, as we will observe the government guidance of the receiving countries accordingly.

Our overseas partners will take the following steps when they cannot safely visit a family:

- 1) Contact the family that is to be assessed and determine if they have the technological capacity to complete some interviews remotely. This will include whether they have Skype, WhatsApp, or another platform to engage in video conferencing.
- 2) Assist them in downloading such apps if they are currently without them. Most are free to use so finances should not be an issue. These apps can be used on cell phones or laptop/desktop computers.
- 3) Schedule an initial call to explain to the family what the process will be to do the assessment. This will include:
 - a. The family should be prepared to engage in video interviews with via video conferencing. Face-to-face is much better than simply using a phone. The same protocols will be followed as if the interview were in-home.
 - b. Request that the family be ready to provide PDFs of financial statements. Paychecks, medical records (if needed), school records and medical records for the child if this is a post-placement, and any other documents would normally be collected.
 - c. Ask the family to request criminal and child abuse registry (if applicable) background checks and have them sent via post or email.
 - d. Tell the family that they will be asked to do a video walk through of their entire home and outdoor area near the home.
 - e. Ask the family to also take photos of the entire home and outside areas and email those to the assessor as part of the final report.

- f. If this is post-placement, the family should prepare the child(ren) to participate in an interview on video. Children may not be comfortable in front of a camera, so the family will be asked to make sure they explain the process but also ensure no coaching is taking place (what to say etc.).
 - g. Inform the family of how long the process will take and that every member of the family should be present to participate.
- 4) Schedule the “visit.”
 - 5) Conduct the visit. In general, the visit will be identical to an in-home visit.
 - 6) If a second visit is needed, it will be scheduled as soon as possible.
 - 7) Collect all the documents and photos needed for the final report.
 - 8) Write the report being sure to note that the home study was done remotely and write a short paragraph of how this was accomplished.

Please note: There may be countries that are not able to do this because of limited technology or other capacity to virtually assess a family. In addition, these types of assessments are not going to be acceptable for every client and may not be accepted by some courts or judges.

If it is necessary, you should also consult the Central Authority in the country where the assessment is to be done to ensure that we are in compliance with all of that country’s regulations under the various Hague Conventions.

It is further worth noting that the current restrictions in movement will also impact on obtaining background or medical checks, as in many countries an ‘in-person’ visit is required (either to provide fingerprints or to make an application to the correct office).