

## Safeguarding babies during the Covid-19 crisis – in social work, family and criminal justice

### A thoughtful space for sharing knowledge and reflection on experience

Intervening in family life to protect an unborn or newly born baby is difficult and highly contentious at the best of times. In the context of the current public health crisis, working alongside families to ensure practice is humane, effective and delivers the best possible outcomes in the longer-term, is even more challenging. Yet the negative consequences for the child and the family of not doing so can last their lifetime.

The initial phase of lockdown radically altered the possibilities for best practice and profoundly re-shaped family experience. Social work practice and family court hearings largely moved online or via the phone. Financial hardship and other stresses increased for families, whilst many statutory and community support services for parents to be, or new parents, that may have mitigated risks or provided reassurance to social workers, were scaled back or temporarily closed. In many local authorities, family members found that face-to-face time with children who they were not able to live with, was replaced with digital family time. Regarding new-born babies, such adaptations were particularly consequential, video-calls or photographs can never replace the physical connection that is needed between parent and new born baby. Where contact does not take place, this may seriously reduce the likelihood of an infant being returned to parents' care. For women in prison who were pregnant or sentenced during the initial phase of lockdown – multiple challenges stood in the way of any contact with their babies and young children.

As lockdown is eased and socially distanced approaches to practice emerge, it is imperative that we share knowledge, capture experience and promote critical reflection among professionals, policy colleagues and family members alike. Practitioners and family members have, and continue to be, forced to respond to the current public health crisis on the basis of incomplete knowledge about the nature of Covid-19 and likely transmission between parent and child, whilst very significant emergency legislative and statutory changes have come into force. Given that even prior to the Pandemic, there were significant variations in practice in a child welfare system that was already in crisis, it is not surprising that early evidence is of very varied responses and decisions regarding parent-baby contact, and child reunification during the Pandemic. Although parents whose children are subject to care proceedings have been able to seek legal representation, it does appear that there have been few legal challenges to decisions to stop all face to face contact with children in interim care. For parents whose infants enter care on an agreed basis through s.20, access to legal representation is not guaranteed. Whereas, for separated parents, the Government gave some clarification about shared parenting explicitly sanctioning the movement of children between households, children not resident with parents on account of child protection concerns were not given the same consideration. Decisions taken during this crisis will have long-lasting effects for parents and children.

Looking ahead, constraints on intensive support to families ushered in with lockdown, may continue, in part due to severe financial pressures on services resulting from this crisis, but also compounding difficulties for a system already in crisis. All this warrants the sharing of both challenges and also examples of service and family resilience and good practice. It is in

this context, that we have established this online space as a key source of reference, sharing and reflection on experience.

### Who are we?

We are a group of collaborating organisations with a shared concern about the unintended but potentially negative longer-term consequences of the current crisis on infants and their parents involved with social work services, as well as in the family and criminal justice systems. We are a group of organisations also close to practice innovation, which equally needs sharing. This action is relevant for all stakeholders, but we are also placing central the voice of families – who have fewer avenues for influencing policy debate and practice.

### Our organisations

Cathy Ashley: Family Rights Group

Angela Frazer-Wicks: Family Rights Group

Susannah Bowyer: Research in Practice

Kirsty Kitchen: Birth Companions

Bev Barnett Jones: Independent consultant

Mary Ryan: Independent consultant

Sheena Webb: Consultant Clinical Psychologist

Karen Broadhurst and Claire Mason -The Centre for Child and Family Justice Research at Lancaster University

### What will we do?

Over the coming weeks we will publish through our respective organisation websites, a series of accessible outputs that speak to the concerns set out above. We aim to capture lived experiences, caring strategies and solidarity initiatives of people during the COVID-19 pandemic both during lockdown and as we adjust to socially distanced practice.

Here are some of the questions we would like to address regarding child protection decisions and contact arrangements for babies, during the current crisis:

1. How have approaches to infant-parent contact varied across the country and with what consequences?
2. What has been the experience of families of request for help or help received during pregnancy and following an infant's birth during this crisis?
3. What has been the family experience of legal representation? In what ways has access to justice been supported or compromised during the crisis?
4. How can the voice(s) of the family better shape responses public health crises?
5. What scientific/social scientific evidence can inform contact and practice decisions, during conditions of lockdown and beyond?
6. What can we learn from creative/resilient responses to this crisis?

### Funding

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