

The PCFSW & Social Work England Best Practice Guide for Video Call/Contact and Virtual/Online Home Visit

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Context and Introduction

This guidance has been developed by the Principal Children and Families Social Worker (PCFSW) network and Social Work England. It has been informed by practitioners and managers and the PCFSW reference group. The guidance aims to support practitioners and managers in thinking about ethical, practical, and professional aspects of video call/contact and virtual/online home visits.

Audience

This document is aimed at social work and social care practitioners and managers as well as qualifying social work students. It does not cover technical details for configuring or using specific software apps. If you have any questions relating to technical aspects or use of apps, you should contact the appropriate person within your organisation.

Content and use of this document

Practice is complex and requires flexibility and there are many variations of video calls/contact and no guide can be exhaustive. This guidance combines practical advice with principle-based recommendations for reflection and further consideration. It addresses complexity while offering flexibility by maintaining a balance between practical pointers and stimulating ethical and reflective thinking, essential for effective relationship-based practice.

This guidance has been developed in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic and the period of transition out of the current lockdown and will be updated in response to the changing circumstances as needs be. Therefore, please use the online document to ensure you have the most recent and up-to-date version.

For ease of use, below is a list of content with links to the different topics in this guide:

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Context and background

Conducting meetings and carrying out assessments or interventions online requires a balance between open and flexible engagement to ensure everyone's voice is heard. It is important to establish shared understanding about concerns and a clear and SMART action plan to support child(ren) and their family.

The larger the number of participants, the more structure is needed to ensure everyone's voice is heard. Such structure should ensure that the voice of young people and their parents and carers inform and guide the process and its outcome.

This guide offers some specific pointers in relation to virtual/online home visits and virtual/online child protection (CP) conferences. Where home visits are more traditionally more informal and less structured, CP conferences present a more formal and structured meeting where interactions are regulated by a chair. You can use these pointers flexibly to suit a variety of other online meetings and online engagements.

There are inevitable limitations to online meetings and virtual home visits and the view of the practitioner and what they see and learn about the home and family dynamics may be limited by what is shown to them. This adds an element of risk to virtual home visits that requires careful reflection and discussion and agreement with your manager as to the adequacy of online/virtual visits and whether and when a face-to-face (f2f) in-person visit may be necessary. The process and considerations relating to offline and in-person home visits are important considerations that should be revisited and re-evaluated on a regular basis.

Understanding my regulator: Social Work England

Social Work England is the specialist regulator for social workers in England. Our role is to set professional standards and assure the public's confidence in social work. We are collaborating on this guide to support social workers in understanding the link between our professional standards and practice.

In response to Covid-19, you may need to adapt your practice and ways of working. In doing so, we encourage you to think carefully about the professional standards and how to maintain them against a rapidly changing context. This guide offers up practical advice from sector leaders to support you as you adapt.

It is important to reflect on changes to practice and to explore professional and ethical dilemmas with peers or managers. Social workers are doing this as they explore new and different ways of working. This can be an important source of learning to record as part of your continuing professional development, which is central to your registration as a social worker.

Some social workers have returned to the profession during the pandemic through temporary registration. There can be a lot to consider when returning to practice. We hope this guide will support you as you support local teams and services at a time of considerable pressure.

We thank the Principal Social Workers networks for their commitment to embedding our professional standards and we continue to work collaboratively to make the link between standards and practice.

If you'd like to know more about Social Work England, you can find more on our website, or get in touch with us, at www.socialworkengland.org.uk.

Online video home visits and meetings

Once the technical issues have been resolved, video call and online connection and communication can generate a sense of proximity. The reduced formality in working from home can also soften some of the formality of the local authority setting and processes. This can mitigate some of the power imbalance between practitioners and people who access services.

Evidence suggests many young people can feel more at ease in digitally mediated communication (PSW research, 2020). Indeed, data from the PSW national research and the more recent information, observations and feedback from frontline practitioners, IROs, CP chairs and others indicate that practitioners have noticed better and more open communication with children and young people and some parents online.

However, in f2f communication, practitioners are guided by a host of situational and contextual factors and verbal and non-verbal cues, most of which are either not present or significantly different in online communication.

Points for reflection

It's important to be aware of the power dynamics that are associated with the meeting or event. You may well find that video/online connection can reduce formality and make people feel at ease, or it could make people feel that professional boundaries are blurred. You should reflect on this beforehand and consider what the impact of video calling may be, so that you can make any useful adjustments. For example, you might want to acknowledge potential feelings of discomfort or unfamiliarity at the start of the meeting. You should also be aware of the way your own image and the image of your surroundings and background may affect others.

Eye contact & body language

Eye contact and body language plays an important role in f2f communication and allows us to appraise the emotional load in conversation. It may be more difficult to use this in the same manner online. It could be helpful to mention in online calls that people need to look at the camera in order for others to see you, and vice versa. Using an external camera or positioning your laptop in a higher position so that it is better aligned with your face will allow you to look into the camera while having a good view of the screen.

Young people often multi-task, engaging in parallel textual, visual and in-person communication. In conversation online, children and young people may avert eye contact to look at their phone, to text a friend or as a way of managing the emotional load that they may experience or to check the reaction of someone else in the room who may be listening to or observing the conversation. When co-present in-person, practitioners can assess the situation and understand such cues. However, remote/online conversations make it difficult to interpret the young person's behaviour and its meaning. Practitioners can draw on their observation and relationship-based skills to make sense of the situation and to support people who access services.

In the same manner that practitioners interpret different cues, children and young people as well as parents and others will consider, scrutinise and interpret a social worker's tone and verbal, non-verbal, behavioural and emotional cues. These condition their reactions and have a direct impact on the content and quality of the conversation and the professional relationship, as well as the level of comfort, disclosure and trust.

Multi-dimensional relationships

The relationship in a two-dimensional screen may take away many of the layered intricacies of relationships and the observational capabilities that go with it. However, behavioural patterns, eye and head movements, facial expressions, tone of voice, pauses, anxiety or nervousness and other

similar observations are cues that can help practitioners' understanding and relationship-based practice online. The reduced non-verbal cues can affect the practitioner's ability to make full use of self and establish and maintain a more in-depth emotional and empathic professional relationship. On the other hand, for some young people and their families, online conversations and relationships may facilitate ease of connection, more open communication and greater self-disclosure.

Regardless of their advantages and limitations, online/virtual home visits and other online meetings and communication have their own distinct characteristics and ethical, practical and professional implications. Therefore, below are some reminders aimed at stimulating ethical thinking and supporting practitioners in online meetings and virtual home visits and when using video calls or video conferencing apps.

For more detailed guidance about digital practice see the "PSW Best Practice Guide on Direct Work with Children and Young People Online" and the "PSW Best Practice Guide on Relationship-based Practice in Digital Context".

Considering behaviour and mindset

Parents, children and young people will have different confidence levels with regards to technology. They may view the different apps as a tool used with friends and family and not necessarily their social worker. While children generally are familiar with video conversations and usually are comfortable with technology, they may feel under pressure to behave in a certain way during a video call, they may become over excited, angry or upset, worried or scared or may feel reluctant to engage.

Pre-call checklist getting ready to engage with children and families

Clarity about the purpose of the call:

It is important to be clear about:

1. The purpose of the call, what you expect and what you need to achieve (this could range from checking to see that the family are ok and have enough food, medication and support, to confirming that the child or young person is safe, etc.);
2. Keep in mind the concerns and the differences between online and offline visits and ensure to adapt your approach accordingly. This is particularly important in a safeguarding home visit such as a child protection visit that substitutes a f2f and in-person visit.
3. If it is helpful, make a bullet point list of your objectives and what you need to achieve, any questions you need to ask or any points you need to raise with the young person or the family. This can help guide you during the call.

Agree a convenient time:

Agree the best time for the video call or virtual home visit and the approximate length. Keep regular contact with young people and their parents, depending on their needs and vulnerabilities and such contact may be scheduled to accompany some other activity. For example, a young person or parent going for daily walk can offer relative freedom and privacy and a good opportunity for conversation

and support. In such situations, the young person or the parent may be at greater ease and more willing to engage.

Selecting a platform and technical details:

Before any video call, check your organisation's IT and digital or social media policies. Many local authorities do not allow use of certain apps or recommend a specific software for video conferencing. If in doubt or if you have never discussed virtual home visits with your manager, confirm how you are going to carry out your virtual home visit or online meeting and whether this complies with your organisational and locally agreed risk management standards and procedures.

Speak with the young person and/or the parents and carers about the technology they prefer to use and as far as possible try to accommodate their request. This will help put the parents and the young person at greater ease.

Try to adopt a flexible and relationship-based approach while ensuring that you meet your objectives and are able to address the relevant issues during home visit. For example, a young person engaging with his/her IRO may prefer to do so over the phone before starting to engage in video calls. This will need to be reviewed on a case by case basis in partnership with parents and children and young people.

In selecting an online platform, consider safety and security. For example, Telegram and WhatsApp offer end-to-end encryption which means others cannot intercept or view your message or communication. However, using WhatsApp will mean that your contacts will be able to see your phone number. Popular online apps such as Zoom have also had reported security breaches.

There are many other popular platforms including MS Teams. Assessing and agreeing the right platform with your employer and the person or people you are supporting is important. Familiarise yourself with the technology including its security settings to ensure privacy and confidentiality. Also make sure you can login and use the app appropriately. It is good practice to test the app with a colleague to make sure everything works, and you can navigate your way around and log into and out of the meeting.

Partnership-working: multi-agency and multi-professional approaches:

It can be helpful to create a buddy-system by pairing up practitioners during the pandemic and the transition period out of the lockdown. This can provide much needed peer connection and can support peer/team cohesion. Furthermore, this can be helpful for case discussions and reflective conversations as well as joint home visits as described in the [virtual home visit section](#) of this document.

Practitioners should have regular discussions and conversations with their manager to provide updates, discuss progress or lack thereof, and ensure effective information-sharing and oversight. In these conversations, practitioners and managers can identify good practice examples and important learning points to be shared with other colleagues. These could be a great source of collective learning and support and can enhance organisational resilience.

Multi-agency and multi-professional working has always been at the heart of effective safeguarding. Given the reduced visibility of children and young people it is even more important during this time, as there may be agencies or professionals such as health visitors who may have contact with the family and the child or may have seen or visited the family home. Therefore, practitioners should ensure regular, timely and effective information-sharing and should require other agencies to do the same.

It is good practice to establish regular multi-agency meetings between local authority and safeguarding partners and other key agencies to ensure all agencies are engaged on strategic and operational levels and proactively contribute toward safeguarding children and young people and their families. Many local authorities are holding such meetings on a weekly basis to support vulnerable young people and young people at the edge of care.

Establishing rapport with the young person and family:

Prior to starting a video call, speak with the family on the phone and build up a rapport with the young person and/or the parents, reminding them of the purpose of the video calls and whether you will have any colleagues joining you on the call.

Consider whether the family have any additional needs. For example, parents with learning disabilities who don't use apps on a regular basis will require some additional time and support to become familiar with the technology and how the technology is going to be used as well as what is expected of them.

Planning call content and structure:

Consider the age of the child or young person and the type of activities and questions that will engage them. What can the child or young person do to be actively involved in the call? They may be able to take you on a virtual tour of the house, show you their bedroom, show you the homework that they have completed or games that they are playing. This process can be gamified and serve as an extension of direct work with children and young people (please see "PSW Best Practice Guide for Direct Work with Children and Young People Online").

Such activities will not only engage children they can also offer a better understanding of the home and the young person's activities. Most importantly, by allowing the young person to lead the game and the way and show you around the home while engaging in role play or playful conversation, describing spaces and explaining things, offers invaluable insight and a window into the young person's mind and lived experiences that is essential for relationship-based practice and effective support and safeguarding.

Boundaries and data

Consider whether you are undertaking a multi-professional or joint virtual home visit. Discuss and agree the priorities, as well as the focus and structure of the meeting. Agree who does what and who facilitates the conversation with the young person or the family.

In preparation, find a neutral area within your home for the call, try to avoid personal or family pictures in the background and/or objects that could be distracting. Be mindful of privacy and confidentiality of the call and the conversation and ensure that other members of your household cannot hear the conversation or see any private or confidential information.

If there are no separate spaces that you can use then try to use a headset so others cannot hear what you hear. Do not use blur or similar functions that may be available in your app and ask the young person and the family not to use such functionalities; this is particularly important in a virtual home visit.

Use your local authority equipment/device and not your personal devices as you may unwittingly connect with a service user on other personal platforms that you use. The video and any data associated with your call are considered local authority data and most local authorities have clear policies that disallow the use of local authority data on personal devices. Such an overlap can raise ethical and professional issues and may result in potential data breach.

Check the camera angle to ensure you are comfortable and can be clearly seen on the screen. It is important to be aware of the image you project and how this may be viewed by others. This includes your appearance, emotional state and how it affects your appearance and disposition (do you come across as calm, anxious, cheerful, energetic, tired or exhausted, etc.), your background (does it show a chaotic kitchen or a blank wall, how does that influence others and their opinion).

Although you may be working from home the video call is a professional engagement with young people and their families and therefore, it is good practice to check your own image at the corner of the screen and make sure you come across in a relatable and professional manner.

[Managing the calls and ensuring appropriate boundaries](#)

Although there may be some technical glitches or excitement about some features of technology, it is essential that they do not distract or detract from the focus of the meeting and the conversation that is the child(ren) and their families and carers.

Join the meeting in a timely manner and if you are chairing or facilitating the meeting, try to login a few minutes earlier. Be patient and mindful that some may still be logging on while others may need some additional help.

Start the call by introducing yourself and making sure everyone on the call can hear and see each other. Ask everyone to introduce themselves by calling on everyone one by one, avoid people speaking over each other.

Discuss why you are calling and how long you anticipate the video call to take. If you are chairing or coordinating the meeting, be clear about ground rules and whether people need to mute their mic or use their camera, etc. For those not using a headset, it is advisable that they mute their mic when not speaking.

Emphasise that the child(ren) and family can intervene and ask to speak at any time during the meeting and that their voice has primacy over everyone else. Be clear whether the meeting is being recorded (see the [note on recording](#)) and be clear about turn taking and raising hands.

The chat box provides a parallel channel for communication and can be used to ask the facilitator to speak or to highlight a problem. If you are chairing or facilitating an online meeting, it is important that either yourself or a colleague keep an eye on the chat box. The chat function can also be used to express opinions without waiting for a turn to speak. However, it should not be used to run parallel discussions that detract from the topic being discussed and the focus of the meeting.

Most apps provide a facility to record the call and some might want to use this for minuting the meeting or taking note of specific details at a later stage. However, this might also make some participants less comfortable or may inhibit some participants in terms of what they are comfortable to share during the meeting. Recording video calls also has ethical and practical implications (for details see the [section on recording calls](#)).

Engage and empower children and young people to be active participants in the video calls. You can ask them to complete a task, such as drawing a picture, and share it with you during the call or at your next video call. Use your relationship-based and communication skills, paraphrase; check understanding and allow space for questions. Use active listening skills and be comfortable with silences.

Divide your virtual visit based on the aims and objectives of the visit the way you would with a face to face visit. As far as possible, concentrate on the meeting and avoid engaging in other activities that may be distracting either for yourself or others; for example, driving, typing or emailing while participating in the meeting.

Have breaks especially if the meeting is long; an hourly break can be helpful. Make the meeting only as long as it needs to be by balancing structure and formal engagement with more informal and interactive elements.

Home visits vary widely, and it is possible to forget something. Have bullet point notes prepared to check that you have covered everything.

At the end of the call, ask the young person and the parents, carers and others about their experience of the call, what they found helpful and if there is anything they would like to be different next time.

Agree the time and details of the next call and summarise any action points, confirm when they will be carried out and by whom. Practitioners can then close the call by thanking the family for their time, participation and contribution.

Unknown people on a call

Video links can be streamed to others who may be listening-in or observing the virtual home visit or video contact and conversation. If you are facilitating a conference call and there are unknown people on the call, ask the parents or the young person who the unknown people are and why they are on the call.

If parents or the young person explain who the unknown person is and why they are on the call, then ask the unknown person to say a few words about themselves. Practitioners should think about how to create a safe and private space online to speak with the young person on their own; solutions may include [concurrent calls](#) to the family or contacting the young person in their room or outside of home, etc.

Action: If at any time during the call, you believe that there is an unknown attendee who refuses to introduce themselves, you can stop or interrupt the conversation and inform them that you will be ending the call, unless that person removes themselves. Should this person not oblige, it is advisable to end the call.

Recording the Call

Video conversations could be recorded without your knowledge or consent. Therefore, as part of the ground rules at the beginning of the call, it is important to clarify whether the call is being recorded and, if it is, explain why. Also, if you believe that attendees may be recording the call, discuss this with them and ask why they are recording the video call. Remember that most apps allow recording of calls and recordings will include the video, audio and the chat content. In general, act as if the call is being recorded.

If you decide to record the call, it is important to note that this may have implications under the Data Protection Act 2018 (incorporating the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)). Therefore, before recording a call, check organisational policies and agree with your manager about recording. Once agreed, practitioners should follow their organisational policies and relevant procedures regarding how to record the call and how to manage the recording: this may include, who to inform, where to save the recording, who will have access to this information, how long it will be kept and for what purpose, and who can access this information and who is responsible for managing it, and so on.

After the call

Reflect on and discuss the video call/contact or virtual home visit with your manager to unpack and evaluate any issues or concerns and consider whether the virtual home visit was/is adequate or if

there is a need for an in-person home visit. Follow up any agreed actions or any pending concerns and maintain regular and adequate contact to ensure children and young people and their parents and carers are safe and supported.

Case records

It is important to write up your call as soon as it is completed and to document the important points and observations. There are many templates for recording your call and most local authorities have their own template.

In documenting the call, consider what's working well for the family as well as any challenges, salient points or relevant observations. The record of the call does not need to be long but needs to be strengths-based and offer critical analysis and insight supported by observation and other relevant evidence.

Pointers for online/virtual home visits using video call

In virtual home visits, we enter the family space through a two-dimensional screen. It takes distinct ethical and practical capabilities to ensure that we are able to consider the multi-dimensionality of the relationship and offer effective support and care for children and young people and their families and carers.

As far as possible, allow multiple and concurrent connections with the family during the home visit and plan the visit to allow time to meet everyone together, as well as separately. It is important to secure separate time and one-to-one conversation with each member of family/household. The joint meeting allows for interaction between family members and can offer a glimpse into the family dynamics and relationships.

Pin the child's and the parents' video feed on your screen. Use relationship-based skills combined with empathy, attentive observation, and active listening to gain an understanding of their experiences, strengths, challenges, risks, needs, concerns, priorities and preferred narrative. Hear their preferred course of action from their own perspective.

Summarise, paraphrase and reflect back to check your understanding and allow space for questions. Use active listening skills and be comfortable with silences.

To ensure that you are able to speak with the child, mum and dad separately, you may wish to carry out a joint virtual home visit with the support of a colleague. For example, one colleague can call the parents and speak with the parents in the living area, while you call the young person and speak with him/her in his/her room. Or in case of domestic abuse, you may agree with your colleague and family for your colleague to call and speak with the perpetrator while you call the person experiencing domestic abuse in a separate room.

In the same manner, you can make concurrent calls to the family by yourself and by using different devices however, this requires careful and more detailed planning. The main purpose of such concurrent calls is to create a temporary space or separate channel of communication where a member of the family can speak with you privately. However, concurrent calls require careful planning to ensure all parties are effectively engaged and calls are well-organised. As long as it is safe, any arrangements for joint or concurrent calls should be discussed and agreed during your preparatory call with the family.

If you are multi-tasking and undertaking simultaneous video calls, as far as possible it is advisable to use two separate devices and separate apps to mitigate the possibility of erroneously sharing private or confidential information from one conversation in another.

If you need to have a view of the house and the different rooms and living spaces, when possible, ask the young person in a developmentally appropriate manner to show you around the house. Depending on the age of the young person you may be able to turn this into a game with the young person. Tapping into the young people's creativity and allowing them to lead the way provides a less structured and often better view of the home. More importantly, the young person's narrative about the different spaces can provide important insight into their lived experience and how they perceive and think about their home environment.

[Pointers for online child protection conference using video conferencing](#)

As far as possible, online meetings with children and families should include video feed to enhance their social presence and ensure the child and parents are seen and heard as fully as possible. When this is not possible, participants may have to disable their video. In all cases, participants should be mindful of the presence of the child and parents and when speaking about them to ensure they maintain a high level of empathy and understanding for the child and family.

It is good practice for the chair to pin the child(ren) and parents' video feed on the computer screen and ask other participants, excluding the child(ren) and parents, to do the same. At a time when children and parents have little visibility in society, this approach enhances the visibility of the child and parents and highlights the importance of their voice, presence and experiences in every conversation, decision or action.

This is particularly important to maintain empathic connection with the emotional state, strengths, stress, distress, anxieties and experiences of the child and family. Furthermore, this approach ensures that everyone can see and is aware of the reactions of the child and parents. This is important to observe the emotional impact that the conversation is having on them and enables the chair/facilitator and other participants to ensure that young people and their families remain supported throughout the meeting.

It is good practice that in more formal meetings, such as a CP conference, to establish clear ground rules including turn taking for example:

- For the Chair to call on every participant to introduce themselves;
- For the Chair to call on every participant to express their views and to agree or disagree about each decision;
- For the Chair to call on participants before they speak;
- For participants to use the chat box or other appropriate facility within the app, such as “raise hand”, to indicate their intention to speak and for the chair to then call on the participant to speak.

In the absence of co-presence, it is good practice for the chair to call on the young person and family periodically to ensure that they are well and following the meeting and discussions and that everything is clear so far. This helps make sure the young person and their family are kept in mind and at the heart of the meeting.

Keeping relationship-based skills at the heart of practice

Online meetings, virtual home visits and other innovations and changes in practice require practitioners to enhance their observation and relational skills to ensure that relationship-based practice remains at the heart of social work and social care practice online and offline.

Practitioners know the family and the relevant context and practice challenges. Therefore, practitioners should draw on their own experience and relationship-based skills and can draw on this guidance to creatively develop their own language of care. They can use the advice in this document with families and design their own tailor-made solution that best suits the child and the family and their specific circumstances, taking into consideration the family’s familiarity and relationship with technology.

Most importantly, any solution needs to be built around and focused on the experience, the voice and the best interest of the child or the young person and their family.

From the Principal Children and Families Social Worker (PCFSW) Network and Social Work England, thank you for all that you do.

Please address all feedback, comments or suggestions to Dr. Peter Buzzi at:
PSWresearch@esafeguarding.org

**For: The PCFSW Research and Practice Development Project; and
The PCFSW Network; and
Social Work England**

Author: Dr. Peter Buzzi (National Research Lead, PCFSW Project); and

Claudia Megele (National Chair PCFSW Network)
Sarah Blackmore (Executive Director Social Work England)

In collaboration with the PCFSW digital research and practice development reference group and with contribution from: (listing in alphabetic order)

Emma Coxon
Heidi Henderson
Lara Timms
Paul McGee
Rob Tyrell

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