



Managing IV matches safely during the Coronavirus pandemic

Safeguarding sits at the heart of Independent Visitor schemes; “Independent visitor services are safe with policies and procedures in place to ensure the safety of children” (**Standard 11**, [National Standards for the Provision of Independent Visitor Services](#)). The scale and impact of the Coronavirus pandemic presents a significant and evolving challenge to safeguarding for professionals and volunteers across the UK.

This document sets out some factors to consider to ensure the safety of children, young people, IVs and Coordinators as visits take place remotely and we make greater use of online resources to manage our Independent Visitor schemes. To support consistency of practice across schemes we refer in this document to our agreed set of benchmarks the ‘**National Standards for the Provision of Independent Visitor Services**’. We also include a table of the principal social media platforms schemes are beginning to use to sustain relationships between trained volunteers, children and young people. A further supporting document produced by the NIVN Project Team is available on <https://ivnetwork.org.uk/managing-matches-during-coronavirus/>

Following guidance issued by the Department of Health, local authorities and our own organisations, IV services have moved away from face-to-face visits by volunteers, to remote ways of staying in contact. IV relationships are built on sustained, consistent direct contact between trained volunteers, looked after children and in some instances care leavers. Replacing direct contact with remote contact is a huge, unprecedented departure from Independent Visitor core activity that needs to be managed safely.

The health crisis is impacting on the needs and vulnerabilities of many of the looked after children and care leavers we support and may expose them to increased risk of:

- Social isolation due to lock-down policy and school closure (loss of peer, family and school support networks)
- Mental ill health including: depression, anxiety, self-harm, suicidal thoughts/behaviour
- Reduced access to support services in the statutory and voluntary sector eg. mental health services
- Placement breakdown
- Being exploited online; grooming; cyber bullying; Identity Theft etc.

The **National Standards** state that ‘The independent visitor will seek to befriend the child and establish a relationship of trust **through regular visits and contact with the child**’ (**Standard 8**). Coronavirus will impact differently on the health and well-being of children, young people and their IVs and is a new area to monitor in relation to match stability, continuity and quality of relationship. It’s recommended that relationships continue to be regularly monitored and the **frequency of contact is reviewed** on a case by case basis.

Standard 9 states that 'Independent visitor relationships are regularly **monitored** to make sure the child is safe, happy and developing a positive relationship with their independent visitor'. Remote contact through telephone, written correspondence and social media, is a new alternative to building and sustaining positive relationships. Establishing the most **effective, safe and accessible communication means** will vary according to organisational policy and guidance and should take into consideration the different needs, abilities and capabilities of children, young people, IVs and Coordinators. Changes in volunteer activity may require a **review of policies and new guidance on safeguarding, confidentiality and professional boundaries** that relate to your IV scheme.

Maintaining good communication with the child, IV, foster carer and social worker will help services safely manage risk and safeguard children and volunteers. This may entail the need to **review and revise risk assessments**. **Standard 11.2** sets out 'Social workers should in turn offer good communication to the independent visitor service including: important updates around the child's life and circumstances that may impact on the relationship/visits. **In particular the social worker should inform the service of up-to-date risk assessments, and any plans for placement moves**'.

Standard 2 sets out that 'Independent visitor services are **child-led**. The needs and views of the child are at the centre of all work including; referrals, matching, visits and endings'. To continue to work to this standard, it is recommended **children are consulted and kept informed of adjustments to the service** they may receive, particularly how visits will take place. Consultation could be facilitated by both IVs and a range of professionals including Coordinators, foster carers, key workers and social workers.

Training and support to Independent Visitors

Standard 9 states '**Independent visitors** complete a thorough induction and training process specific to the role, and **receive on-going support** to give them the skills and knowledge to confidently fulfil their role'. The NIVN Project Team has received feedback that indicates IV recruitment and training activity around the UK is being scaled-back in line with lock-down policy. Some members have shared that aspects of IV recruitment and training that were being delivered online, are continuing whilst others are looking to move areas of face to face recruitment and training online. **Maintaining on-going support to volunteers** is essential, to **sustain safe, positive IV relationships**. This may include **1:1 supervision and group support to follow revised policies and guidance on safeguarding, confidentiality and professional boundaries**, as relationships move online. Examples of new volunteer practices shared, include the posting of resources by volunteers to children, such as games and art

materials, and use of personal devices that are not ordinarily permitted and require amendments to policy and/or fresh guidance.

Promoting and managing Online Safety


Mobile devices, social networking sites and the internet offer alternative tools to engage with children and young people. However, if used inappropriately, they can also pose safeguarding risks, threats to data security and GDPR breaches.

Many organisations have issued guidance to staff and volunteers on the use of technology and ensuring information security during the Coronavirus pandemic. There are wide variances across NIVN member organisations in relation to IT infrastructure, media platforms and policy; for example volunteer use of personal media devices and accounts as opposed to the use of organisational media devices and dedicated accounts.

As set out above, children and volunteers will have different abilities, capabilities and preferences of communication and online technology. **Standard 1** in the '**National Standards for the Provision of Independent Visitor Services**' sets out that Independent Visitor services must be **accessible**; this relates not only to promotion and publicity but the quality of communication between the IV and child or young person. Communication continues to need to be accessible when conducted by telephone, in writing or online. Communicating effectively and safely with children is a core component of IV training. Volunteers may require **guidance and support to communicate safely and effectively** with children and young people as relationships are conducted remotely.

Below is a chart that sets out some of the main social media platforms IV services are using to continue IV relationships. The table outlines the official age rating for each platform, to consider when using any of these tools.

For further advice on online safety, we recommend you visit <https://www.net-aware.org.uk/tips-and-advice>. Net-aware also provides a review of risks and safety features of a wide number of social media platforms and apps. <https://www.net-aware.org.uk/networks>.

Social Platform	Description	Age Restriction
Netflix Party 	Netflix Party is a free Google Chrome extension that lets you simultaneously watch Netflix with your friends. Netflix synchronises the programme or movie for everyone, so if one person presses pause, everyone's screen pauses. You can also chat to each other while watching a programme	Official age rating 13+.

	using the written messaging features.	
<p>Skype</p> 	Skype is a platform and app that lets you make audio and video calls to other people around the world. You can also send instant messages.	Official age rating 13+.
<p>WhatsApp</p> 	WhatsApp is an instant messaging app which lets you send messages, images and videos in one-to-one and group chats with your contacts. You can choose to share your live location for up to eight hours with one contact or a group. Only people who have a WhatsApp account can send and receive messages through the app. Messages can be sent one to one or within a group conversation. For all messages sent WhatsApp sends “read receipts” to tell sender if the message was delivered, read, seen or played.	Official age rating 16+
<p>FaceTime</p> 	FaceTime lets you make video and audio calls from your iPhone, iPad and iPod touch. You can also capture photos during calls using the Live Photos feature, which is like a screenshot.	Official age rating 4+
<p>Consoles: Xbox, PS4, Nintendo, Wii, PC etc.</p> 	Players can usually communicate with one another: perhaps using onscreen messaging which is typed during the gameplay or some games allow voice communication so that players can swap their thoughts freely whilst competing just like a telephone conversation.	Official age rating; this can depend on which games the child or young person has. Ensure any game played is age appropriate.

