

WillisPalmer Covid-19 Action Plan

WillisPalmer is continuing to provide most services throughout the Covid-19 outbreak, including assessment services. This updated guidance refers to this work in particular. Home working contracts such as child abuse litigation reports are functioning as usual.

Introduction

The Covid-19 outbreak has resulted in government providing instructions on all activity taking place outside the home. With regard to working practices, the advice is that work should be undertaken from home unless it is not possible to do so.

Current government advice is:

“If you cannot work from home then you can still travel for work purposes, provided you are not showing coronavirus symptoms and neither you nor any of your household are self-isolating. This is consistent with advice from the Chief Medical Officer.”

For detailed guidance see:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others#going-to-work>

This raises the question as to whether independent assessments commissioned by local authorities can be conducted solely through home-working or whether in some circumstances it is acceptable to undertake a home visit (to those being assessed) or travel outside of your home, for example to observe contact.

Advice to local authority children’s services is clear, “local authorities will be expected to prioritise support to the most vulnerable children, including undertaking necessary visits while taking appropriate infection control measures”.

Independent Assessments

In certain circumstances local authorities delegate statutory functions to independent social workers such as completion of pre-proceedings or court ordered assessments. In addition they commission expert assessments from psychologists and other health professionals. This updated guidance refers firstly to those types of cases currently being undertaken by WillisPalmer professionals and secondly, how we as an organisation are going to manage new commissions effective from Monday 30th March.

With regard to assessment services we will continue to accept new instructions in the normal way. We anticipate being able to offer most services with the exception of cognitive psychological assessments. We are extending timescales to 12 weeks so that we can begin the assessments using technology and then towards the latter part

we can undertake home visits/observations presuming the restrictions will have been lifted.

Existing cases

- i) In accordance with government advice (above) all incomplete visits/interviews should where possible be undertaken using remote technology unless a risk assessment indicates it is appropriate to do otherwise. WP professionals are responsible for undertaking this risk assessment in so far as it is personal to you with regard to your individual and family considerations. Account also needs to be taken regarding the issues with respect to the person(s) being assessed. We are happy to provide support and advice during this process.

For Risk Assessment Questionnaire click the link below:

<https://www.willispalmer.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/WP-Covid-19-Risk-Assessment-Questionnaire.pdf>

- ii) If neither a home visit/interview/observation of contact is available as an option and remote assessment is not viable and it is not possible therefore to complete the assessment you should contact us so that we can inform the commissioning organisation immediately.
- iii) In those circumstances we will give the local authority and/or solicitor the following options from which to choose:
- File an incomplete report setting out the work undertaken to date; the reasons why it is not possible to complete the assessment either in person or remotely and provide a preliminary view if it is possible to do so, or:
 - Request a delay to the filing of the report until such time that it is possible to complete the assessment

New cases

- i) We will be quoting a timescale of 12 weeks on all new assessments.
- ii) WP professionals will be able to make a start on the work using appropriate technology where possible. For example, interviews with parents/children/foster carers and other professionals.
- iii) Home visits/observations of contact and other 'out of home' requirements forming part of the assessment can be undertaken towards the latter part of

the 12-week period once restrictions have been lifted (assuming of course that they have been so lifted).

- iv) During the 12-week period we would ask all WP professionals to continually risk assess the case and consider the option of undertaking domiciliary visits in circumstances only where it is considered safe to do so.

We consider the work we are doing on behalf of local authority and legal colleagues to be essential work. Our role in supporting you to complete assessments regarding whether a child is suffering, or is likely to suffer significant harm is critical to the welfare of children. However, in certain cases some delay to the completion of work will be justifiable and appropriate. We understand the courts are helpfully acknowledging this. We also acknowledge that completing a whole assessment using only remote technology is unlikely to be as robust as undertaking at least some face-to-face visits but this will vary from case to case.

However, we are living in unique times and this means we need to adjust our working practices based upon the information before us and the guidance coming out of government, while at the same time acknowledging that the work we are doing forms a critically important part of the child protection system. Therefore we are committed to working with you as best we can through this crisis.

Thank you for your continued support.

Mark Willis
Chief Executive