8. Release children in all forms of detention, whenever possible, and provide children who cannot be released with the means to maintain regular contact with their families.

There was no evidence of children in detention being released as part of the COVID-19 pandemic response.

There was an immediate cessation of all external visitors to young people in the Juvenile Justice Centre, including visits from family. While they were provided virtual access to families and friends through online technology such as Zoom and Skype, there was a noted reluctance among the young people to engage with these forms of communication. Some found it hard to adapt or mistrusted the privacy of the calls. This led to feelings of disconnectedness and isolation. During the first 10 days after a young person entered the JJC, they had to be isolated from others in the Centre and could only have access to phone calls with family and friends.

During focus groups with young people in alternative care, NICCY heard powerful testimony from young people about the difficulties arising from restrictions on face-to-face contact with family and professionals. Young people in secure care said that visiting had been curtailed because of COVID-19 and that Zoom calls were not as good as a face-to-face visits. They said it was sometimes difficult to maintain contact virtually as the IT equipment was broken or it did not work properly. Some reported problems trying to contact social workers and commented that the lack of contact made it difficult for them to build relationships. Similarly to young people in the JJC, they said that COVID-19 had made things more difficult for young people coming into secure care as they also had to isolate when they arrived.

NICCYs legal team supported a sixteen-year-old being treated as an inpatient in a mental health facility. At the beginning of 'lockdown' the unit advised that direct visits from her immediate family could no longer take place. After a review of Covid-related regulations and practice applied in other medical settings, NICCY made representations to the psychiatric unit noting that their policy made less allowance for visits than comparable settings. The visitation policy at the unit was changed to allow direct contact.

See also Chapters 3, 6 and 9.

INQ000147142_0015