

The PCFSW Best Practice Guide for Video Call/Contact and Virtual/Online Home Visit

15 April 2020

Last updated: 17 April 2020

Purpose and objective:

This guidance has been developed by the Principal Children and Families Social Worker (PCFSW) network in consultation with practitioners and managers and the PCFSW reference group to support practitioners and managers in thinking about ethical, practical and professional aspects and implications 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.

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. Therefore, rather than being overly prescriptive, this best practice guidance combines practical advice with principle-based recommendations for reflection and further consideration. This approach addresses complexity while offering flexibility by maintaining a balance between practical pointers and stimulating ethical and reflective thinking that is essential for good and effective relationship-based practice. For ease of use, below is a list of content with links to the different topics in this guide:

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This guidance has been developed in relation to 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.

Context and background

Online meetings and video calls and video conferences can be used for a variety of purposes ranging from checking to make sure young people and their parents and carers are well and supported and for example, have enough food, medication and other necessities or for remote intervention (e-intervention) or in-person intervention to protect children and young people. Regardless of purpose, conducting meetings and carrying out assessments or interventions online require a balance between open and flexible engagement with young people and their family vis-à-vis structure to ensure everyone's voice is heard and to establish shared understanding between all stakeholders about current concerns and a clear and SMART action plan to support child/ren and their family.

As a general rule the larger the number of participants the more structure is needed in order to ensure everyone's voice is heard. However, such structure should ensure that the voice of young people and their parents and carers inform and guide the process and its outcome.

Given the diversity of meetings this guide offers some specific pointers in relation to virtual/online home visits and virtual/online child protection (CP) conferences. These are two settings that vary significantly in their context and approach and in terms of structure represent two ends of a spectrum; whereas home visits are a more informal and less structured meeting with potential interaction with multiple participants, CP conferences present a more formal and more structured meeting where interactions are regulated by conference chair. Practitioners can use these points flexibility to suite 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 being 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 visit 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.

Thinking about online video home visits and meetings:

The digital context of practice poses many challenges as well as opportunities and digital platforms can generate diverse reactions among different people. However, once the technical issues have been resolved actual video call and the online connection and communication can generate a sense of proximity and the reduced formality in working from home can 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 suggest 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 in-person 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 communications.

Eye contact

Eye contact plays an important role in f2f communication and allow us to appraise the emotional load in conversation however, it may be more difficult to use eye contact in the same manner online. It may be worth mentioning that you need to look at the camera in order for others to see you looking at them. Using an external camera or positioning your laptop on 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. Therefore, in conversations children and young people may avert eye contact to look at their phone or 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 are able to assess the situation and understand such cues. However, in remote/online conversations and looking through the eye of a camera makes 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 during the video call or virtual home visit, children and young people as well as parents and others will consider, scrutinise and interpret practitioner's tone and verbal, non-verbal, behavioural and emotional cues and these condition their reactions and have a direct impact on the content and quality of the conversation and the professional relationship as well as young person's and their family's level of comfort, disclosure and trust.

Rendering the multi-dimensional relationships

The relationship in a two-dimensional screen may take away many of the layered intricacies of relationships and the soft skills and observational capabilities that go with it. Therefore, it is more important than before to sharpen and use relationship-based practice skills to preserve and render the multi-dimensionality of the conversation and the professional relationship. Behavioural patterns, eye and head movements, facial expressions, tone of voice, pauses, anxiety or nervousness and other similar observations are relational cues that can help practitioners' understanding and relationship-based practice online.

On the one hand, 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. 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".

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 best practice reminders aimed at supporting practitioners in online meetings and virtual home visit and when using video calls or video conferencing apps.

As a general rule, in online meetings and virtual home visits and in the absence of visual cues, the larger the number of participants the more structure is needed in order to ensure everyone's voice is heard. However, such structure should ensure that the voice of young people and their parents and carers inform and guide the process and work.

Being mindful of behavior and mindset:

1. Parents, children and young people will have different confidence levels with regards to technology.
2. Parents, children and young people may view the different apps that's used as a tool used with friends and family and not necessarily their social worker.
3. 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 there may be a lack of engagement.

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

Clarity about the purpose of the call:

1. What's the purpose of the video call? Is it staying in touch and connecting with the family or is it a part of safety plan where it's been agreed that all calls should be virtual calls and the family home should be seen during these calls.
2. It is important to be clear about:
 - a. The purpose of the call and 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 or that a mum experiencing domestic abuse is ok, and so on);
 - b. Keep in mind the concerns and the differences between online and offline visits and ensure to adopt your approach accordingly; this is particularly important if this is a safeguarding home visit such as a child protection visit that substitutes a f2f and in-person visit.
 - c. 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 for the video call or virtual home visit:

3. Agree the best time for the video call or virtual home visit and the approximate length of the virtual home visit or the video call/contact. It is good practice to 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, when a young person or parent goes for daily walk or walking the dog or other similar activities 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 for the call and the technical details:

4. 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.
5. If in doubt or if you have never discussed virtual home visits with your manager, confirm with your manager 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.
6. Speak with the young person and/or the parents and carers about the technology they prefer to use and as much as possible try to accommodate their request and as long as it meets your goals and is not in conflict with your employer's policies and guidelines. This will help put the parents and the young person at greater ease.
7. In some situations, a video call will immediately be preferred while in other situations initial telephone calls may be better before starting to use video; it is good practice 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.
8. In selecting an online platform consider the safety and security of the platform. 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. There are also popular online apps such as Zoom that have had security breaches with hackers hijacking conversations or posting inappropriate and sexually explicit images and messages in private conversations including conversations among teachers and pupils. There are many other popular platforms including MS Teams and others. Therefore, practitioners should carefully consider reliability and security of the platform/app and their connection to preserve privacy and confidentiality and prevent data breach and unauthorised access.
9. 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 and multi-agency and multi-professional approach:

10. 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 support peer/team cohesion and help mitigate feelings of isolation at a time when most practitioners are working from home and by themselves. 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.
11. 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.

12. Multi-agency and multi-professional working has always been at the heart of effective safeguarding and 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.
13. 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.

Establish rapport with the young person and family:

14. Prior to starting a video call, speak with the family on the phone and build up 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.
15. 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 the call content and structure:

16. Consider the age of the child or young person and the type of activities and questions that will engage the child/ren or young person(s). What can the child/ren or young person(s) do to be actively involved in the call? For example, the child/ren 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 it 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.

Being mindful of boundaries and data breach:

1. If this is a multi-professional and joint virtual home visit, discuss and agree the priorities and the focus and structure of the meeting as well as who does what and who facilitates the conversation with the young person or the family.
2. In preparation for the video call or virtual home visit, 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.
3. 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.

4. 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.
5. 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 therefore, practitioners should exercise caution and be mindful of the implications of such overlaps and using their personal devices for professional purposes.
6. Check your appearance and 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.

During the call: Managing the call:

1. 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.
2. Join the meeting in a timely manner and if you are chairing or facilitating the meeting try to login a few minutes earlier but be patient and mindful that others may be still logging on while others may need some additional help.
3. Start the call by introducing yourself and making sure everyone on the call can hear and see each other.
4. Ask everyone to introduce themselves by calling on everyone one by one avoid people speaking over each other.
5. Discuss why you are calling and how long you anticipate the video call to be.
6. 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 then it is advisable that they mute their mic when not speaking otherwise, there may be an echo or feedback sound as the computer mic picks up the sound from the loud speaker.
7. Emphasise that the child and family can intervene and ask to speak at any time during the meeting if they have any questions or anything they wish to share.
8. Be clear whether the meeting is being recorded; see the [note on recording](#) below.
9. Be clear about turn taking and raising hands before speaking but ensure that children and families know that they can ask to speak at any time and that their voice has primacy over everyone else's.
10. The chat box provides a parallel channel for communication and can be used to ask the facilitator to speak or to highlight a problem such as problems with mic or

audio system. Therefore, 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.

11. The chat box can also be used to express one's opinion without waiting for one's 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.
12. Most apps provide the 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 below on recording calls](#)).
13. Engage and empower child/ren and young people to be active participants in the video calls. You can also ask the child or young person to complete a task such as drawing a picture and sharing it with you during the call or at your next video call.
14. Use your relationship-based and communication skills, paraphrase; check understanding and allow space for questions. Use active listening skills and be comfortable with silences.
15. Divide your virtual visit based on the aims and objectives of the visit the way you would with a face to face visit.
16. If you are an attendee or guest in the meeting ensure you join the meeting in a timely manner and, if possible, a few minutes before the start of the meeting. Also, as much 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, watching television and so on while participating in the meeting.
17. Have breaks especially if the meeting is long an hourly break can be helpful.
18. Make the meeting only as long as it needs to be by balancing more structure and formal engagement with more informal and interactive conversation.
19. Home visits vary widely and it is possible to forget something you need to ask or a point you need to make. Therefore, have the bullet point notes you prepared earlier to hand and check that you have covered all you needed to cover.
20. During the call you can see your own image at the corner of the screen as it is seen by others. This enables you to see yourself in action as you engage with children and families and offers opportunity for reflection and enhancing our relationship-based skills.
21. At the end of the call it is good practice to ask the young person and the parents, carers and others about their experience of the call and what they found helpful and if there is anything they would like to be different in the next call.
22. It is also important to agree the time and details of the next call and to summarise any action points including by who and when they will be carried out and completed. Practitioners can then close the call by thanking the family for their time, participation and contribution.

Unknown people on a call:

1. Video links can be streamed to others who may be listening-in or observing the virtual home visit or video contact and conversation.
2. 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.

3. 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.
4. 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 from the call. Should this person not remove themselves from the call it is advisable to end the call.

Recording the Call

1. 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.
2. Remember that most apps allow recording of the call and recordings will include the video, audio and the chat box content. In general, act as if the call is being recorded.
3. If you decide to record the call, it is important to note that this may have implications under the General Data Protection Act (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. Therefore, before recording a call, practitioners should check their organisational policies and agree with their manager about recording the call to ensure they are allowed you to do. 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:

1. 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 physical in-person home visit.
2. 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 of the video call/contact or virtual home visit:

3. It is important to write up your call as soon as it is completed and to document the more important points and observations. There are many templates for recording your call and most local authorities have their own template therefore, this guide does not include a template for the call record.
4. In documenting the call consider what's working well for the family as well as challenges. And any salient points or relevant observations.
5. The record of the call does not need to be long but needs to be strength-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 and it takes distinct ethical and practical capabilities to ensure that through good communication, receptive and open disposition, mindful interaction and reflective observation we are able to render the multi-dimensionality of the relationship and offer effective support and care for children and young people and their families and carers.

As much as possible, allow multiple and concurrent connections with the family during the home visit and plan the home visit to allow time for meeting everyone together as well as separately, ensuring 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 as needs be and 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 and 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.

Social workers can draw on their experience and the PSW Best Practice Guide for Direct Work with Children and Young People Online to creatively engage children and young people online. For example, social workers can ask children to draw how they are feeling, life story work can also be undertaken online as well as other direct work activities (See: the PSW Best Practice Guide for Direct Work with Children and Young People).

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 by asking the support of a colleague to place concurrent calls to the family. 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 calls or concurrent calls should be discussed and agreed during your preparatory voice call with the family.

You can also place separate calls on different devices or different apps to the child and the family or to the perpetrator and the family. This offers the opportunity to speak with children or with people experiencing abuse privately and on their own.

If you are multi-tasking and doing simultaneous video calls, as much as much possible it is advisable to use two separate devices and separate apps to mitigate the possibility of erroneously sharing private or confidential information from 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 much 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 during the meeting. When this is not possible due to technical or other limitations 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.

As much as possible, it is good practice for the chair to pin the child's/children's and the 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 and the emotional impact that the conversation is having on them and enables the chair/facilitator and other meeting participants to ensure that young people and their families remain supported throughout the online meeting and receive appropriate attention and empathic emotional support when needed.

It is good practice that in more formal meetings such as a CP conferences, 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.

However, the child and family should be reminded that they can speak and share their views at any time during the meeting by indicating to the chair that they wish to do so.

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 Best Practice Guide to creatively develop their own language of care and with each family 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.

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Published by: The Principal Children and Families Social Worker (PCFSW) Network

Published on: 15 April 2020

Last updated: 17 April 2020

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