

COUNCIL
16 JULY 2020

OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE PORTFOLIO

Purpose of the Report

1. To inform and update Members on progress within Children's Services since the last meeting of Council. The following are the main areas of work under the Portfolio for Children's Services, with a specific focus on COVID-19 pandemic response.

Workforce

2. Staff throughout the directorate were predominantly able to rapidly move to home-based working, which was positive in terms of our ability to continue to operate services. There are some exceptions to this, however where staff are building based, risk assessments were completed, and social distancing measures put in place to ensure health and safety.
3. To support our understanding of how services were being impacted by the crisis, a workforce capacity tracking tool was developed. This tool enables us to track changes in staffing capacity and capability, highlighting pressure points and, therefore, supporting managers across the service to monitor and review service capacity on a daily basis.
4. Alongside the capacity tracker, a directorate 'pool' of staff who were unable to undertake their normal work or work from home was developed, so that there was a single line of sight of resources available at any given time. This has meant that through close monitoring of pressures, staff have been temporarily reassigned to different roles to build capacity in priority areas. This has led our 'people services' to be in a position where we have been and continue to be able to effectively manage workforce capacity in a responsive and considered way. Staff have been flexible in their approach in moving to other roles, and the Workforce Development Team and service area managers have provided required training and support to enable them to undertake new tasks. Staff report that they are enjoying new experiences.

Legislative Changes

5. Flexibilities in care planning processes for children in care and adoption pathways has been introduced through the Adoption and Children (Corona Virus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, which came into force on the 24th April 2020. Other than introducing virtual methods of working, including initial and review health assessments, the LA has not implemented any of the amendments
6. Children's Services have remained operational throughout the pandemic. The Emergency Duty Team, which provides the Council's out of hours service, has continued to operate normally.

7. On 30 April 2020, the Secretary of State issued a notice to be in force from 1 May to 31 May 2020 to modify the duty in section 42 of the Children and Families Act 2014 to secure special educational provision and health care provision in accordance with Education Health and Care (EHC) plans. The notice means that local authorities and health bodies must use 'reasonable endeavours' to discharge their duties, considering for each child and young person with an EHC plan what they can reasonably provide in the circumstances.
8. In Darlington normal decision-making processes for SEND have continued through the Covid-19 period. The Multi-Agency Panel (MAP) continues to meet virtually fortnightly, with well attended panels taking place since the current circumstance began. Assessment for EHCPs have continued to ensure placements have continued to be made in a timely manner.

Safeguarding and Assurance

9. The Council and our partners completed RAG rating of all children and families that were open to services at the start of lockdown, to ensure clarity for who would be of most concern and prioritised for visits. Each organisation carried out Covid-19 Risk Assessments, to enable them to identify the most high-risk families that required continued management and prioritisation should staffing levels be affected by the pandemic, inclusive of face to face home visits. The RAG rating continues to ensure that the situation for each child can be seen quickly and a decision made regarding frequency, type of visit and also whether there are any health issues that needed to be considered for the child, their parent or carer.
10. The risk assessments are completed for all children who become active to the service and are also reviewed to ensure they remain live and reflect the child's current situation.
11. The individual RAG rated lists from each organisation were combined to produce two Multi-Agency templates for children who have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and Children who have a social worker, both of which are held centrally by the Council, enabling the most vulnerable to be supported and to safeguard children who are at risk.
12. A multi-agency group was established within the first week, known as the Critical Safeguarding Partnership Group (CSPG) to ensure strategic oversight across all agencies of all vulnerable children, which included those with a Social Worker, those with an EHCP and those receiving Continuing Health Care. CSPG meet bi-weekly, and is responsible for the management, oversight and response to any emergency regarding the most vulnerable children in Darlington. They direct services to meet need in line with the multi-agency high risk red rated children who have been identified as being at 'Significant risk of serious injury/death' using the risk assessment tool.
13. A new set of guidance was developed by partners in the early stages of lock down, which determined organisational practices and engagement with children and families in line with government measures. The guidance was approved by the Statutory Safeguarding Partners.

Vulnerable Children School Attendance

14. Since the start of lockdown, and the partial school closures on 23 March, 100 per cent schools in Darlington have remained open for the vulnerable children and those with critical worker parents. This compares positively with the national average 61 per cent of schools being open in April 2020. In doing so, our schools recognised the importance of continuity of care and accessibility, in contrast to some other local authority areas where a 'hub' model has been adopted, meaning some children could not attend their usual school at that time.
15. All of Darlington's schools have made arrangements that enable children with a social worker to continue to attend, and children and their parents are encouraged to do so. Attendance is monitored daily as schools share daily attendance logs with the council.
16. Each individual child's circumstances was risk assessed with recommendations made about school attendance, based on the child's best interests, and these are reviewed regularly. This has been applied to children who are subject to Child Protection (CP), Looked After Children (LAC), Child in Need (CiN) or accessing Early Help services, and those with EHCP.
17. Whilst in the early stages of lockdown attendance was lower than we would have liked, the continued multi-agency focus on our vulnerable children being in school, and driving this as the key protective factor, has resulted an increased attendance rate.
18. On 15 June 2020 average attendance at school for children with a social worker was 26 per cent. This compares favourably with the last published Department for Education national attendance estimate for this cohort which was 18 per cent as of 11 June 2020. Current attendance rates for specific groups are:
 - Statutory school age LAC – 26 per cent
 - Statutory school age CIN – 19 per cent
 - Statutory school age CP – 34 per cent
 - Children with an EHCP – 17.6 per cent on 15 June, increasing from 8.7 per cent on 24 April
19. Throughout the pandemic there has and continues to be a strong multi-agency focus on attendance. Liaison between Head Teachers, Designated Safeguarding Leads, Social Workers and health colleagues has ensured that the most vulnerable children have received a coordinated approach to their education and online learning.
20. Schools have further developed their practice in order to support vulnerable families during this period. This has included delivering free school meals and regularly contacting or visiting children they consider most vulnerable.
21. An agreed schedule of welfare checks and revised safeguarding protocols is in place to ensure that any children with a social worker that isn't in school has frequent contact with the school, and so that school can quickly raise any issues with the relevant social worker. Where required, increased visits from social care has been put in place.

Front Door

22. Throughout early stages of lockdown referrals reduced substantially (as they did nationally), with 38 children being referred during April 2020 compared to 104 during

April 2019. Since June numbers have steadily risen to nearer normal levels, with 76 children referred during May 2020 compared to 88 during May 2019.

23. Although the number of contacts received regarding domestic abuse decreased (17.3 per cent of the contacts during April and May 2020 compared to 20.9 per cent during April and May 2019), a larger number of these progressed onto referred onto social care than last year. This suggests a rise in the severity of the abuse and a higher level of impact/risk/concern for the child.

Early Help

24. Early Help services have continued to respond to all contacts from professionals and members of the public, maintaining a focus of regular contact with families. Staff have offered advice and guidance on how to manage stress, reduce conflict between parents and children, and using restorative practices to help families build relationships, to help sustain positive changes they have made.
25. Services usually delivered through the children's centres are being delivered online, with advice about children's development and regular video sessions around play and positive interaction, proving very popular with families. Some families have needed more than virtual contact, and visits to families in crisis have been undertaken.
26. Some families required food parcels, which were delivered by staff adhering to appropriate working practices, and who used the opportunity to speak to children and families through windows and doors, gathering the voice of the child and gaining a better understanding of what life was like for them in lockdown.
27. Staff continue to review and offer telephone and virtual home visiting support where necessary for those RAG rated as green, and have been creative in responding to need, using technology and social media, enabling 200-300 parents to access various sessions.
28. Where communication with some children has proved challenging, we increased use of the Mind of My Own (MOMO) to better support this. Video calls with young people on the autistic spectrum has brought a different range of challenges, and staff have been creative in engaging children in rapport and conversations.

Missing Episodes

29. Most children have adhered to lockdown measures well, with missing episodes reducing, 38 episodes relating to 28 children were reported during April and May 2020 compared to 66 missing episodes relating to 38 children reported during April and May 2019.
30. Return home interviews have continued through virtual visits, and overall the experience in respect of this mode of communication is positive with 93.5 per cent of interviews being carried out in time compared to 76.2 per cent during April and May 2019 and 71.0 per cent of children engaged in their interview compared to 55.5 per cent during April and May 2019. Reasons for the missing episodes include children feeling they needed to get out for a while and meet up with friends (usually saying at a safe distance). Most children and young people have understood the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic, and staff have given information about the virus.

Assessment and Safeguarding

31. The Assessment and Safeguarding teams have continued to undertake assessments, reviews, multi-agency meetings by adapting to virtual mediums such as Microsoft Teams, FaceTime, and WhatsApp video calls. Where it has been safe to do so and social distancing could be applied, or PPE available and worn, face to face home-visits have taken place for Children in Need, children subject to Child Protection Plans and children who are in care. Where it has not been safe to undertake physical home-visits, virtual visits have taken place, and the children seen via video and spoken with also. As PPE became more available to the teams, the number of physical visits are significantly increasing.
32. Virtual decision-making forums for care planning of children have successfully been maintained with regular attendance from organisations and meetings such as Child Protection Conferences and Looked After Reviews continuing remotely, using varied modes of communication applications, ensuring the focus of the Independent Reviewing Officers work has continued.

Children with Disabilities

33. To minimise and reduce the risk of Covid-19, changes were made to the number of children accessing Harewood Hill Lodge short break centre. Risk assessments identified the most vulnerable children and they have been provided with a service that was/is targeted for a group of vulnerable children/young people with a disability. Staff have been grouped into different 'bubbles' so that if any child or staff member show any Covid-19 symptoms, the specific 'bubble' can isolate and not affect others.
34. Children and families have been very understanding of the change to the way social workers have stayed in touch by virtual contact. As a result of the medical vulnerabilities of some of these children, parents and carers have been "shielding" so have accepted virtual visits as being beneficial by keeping everyone safe, whilst providing a good level of support.

Children with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP)

35. The Council, Health services and schools have and continue to work together to ensure that provision is available for children and young people with an Education

Health and Care (EHC) Plan. School Leaders are working closely with health and social care partners to identify and support their most vulnerable pupils to ensure they are receiving the required services they need where they can't access these via school.

36. A multi -agency risk assessment process has been established involving schools, health services and social care to ensure that these young people are able to attend school where possible and receive appropriate support when they cannot attend. A risk assessment has been completed for all 799 children and young people in receipt of an Educational Health and Care Plan in Darlington.

Children in Care

37. From the beginning of April there has been a total of 26 children brought into care with 61.54 per cent of these being placed with extended family members. The circumstances have varied with some as a result of care planning pathways in progress and others due to immediate safeguarding needs.
38. During the pandemic the Family Courts have needed to adapt to new processes and have reduced the type of hearing they will list in order to manage virtual Court hearings. The Courts remained open for urgent applications in respect of children who are at risk of significant harm and require oversight of the Court, resulting in children who require safeguarding by being accommodated with the Local Authority throughout this period.
39. However, non-urgent applications have been unable to be lodged with Court, and this has meant that some children have not been able to exit care in the timescales that would ordinarily have been applied, it has also caused some delay in being able to progress with care planning. Consequently, the number of children in care is continuing to rise as the number of children who are able to leave care has been significantly reduced due to these working practices.
40. The Family Courts will re-open to non-urgent applications on the 1 July 2020, they will have a backlog of matters from several Local Authorities including Darlington to have to timetable.
41. Contact between children in care and their families has been via virtual methods. Skype, WhatsApp and Zoom have been favourites of the children and family members and although this has been challenging for all concerned, everyone has adapted well with this way of working. Young people have found it extremely positive and for some children in specific circumstances, they have been able to have increased virtual contact, which has been of benefit to all.
42. There has been minimal movement in placements as a result of Covid-19 and moves have only taken place when there have been risks of infection with a need to protect the child, other children in placement and/or their carers.
43. Therapeutic Practitioners are supporting social workers with young people and family mental health and well-being, enabling plans to be put in place to reduce risk and escalation.
44. Social Workers have used notelets and postcards as well as Moonpig cards to celebrate young peoples' birthdays, sending texts and using FaceTime to conduct

virtual visits. This virtual contact has included a “check-in” with carers prior to the phone being passed to the child to view their room.

45. The participation workers hold weekly meetings to capture how young people are dealing with the Covid-19 restrictions and capture their thoughts followed by a quiz with the Darlo Care Crew.
46. Residential Homes have been working as per regulations and standards, with staff maintaining a focus on safeguarding children in their care, and despite some challenging situations, there has been very little movement in placements.

Care Leavers

47. Our care leavers have remained in contact with services and have been supported in various ways during the pandemic has included. Increased telephone support/virtual contact home visits with those who have required this level of support, and normal weekly fare share food delivery was re-diverted to Kings Church so that workers could collect and deliver to care leavers that need this support each week.
48. Continued weekly access to the Psychological Well-being Practitioner for Care Leavers has continued via telephone and there are plans to progress this to video calls. Appointments are available evenings and Saturdays.
49. An informal Corporate Parenting Panel is being planned for late July, as it has been unable to meet due to lockdown restrictions. In line with other democratic meetings this will be virtual.

Fostering

50. Our foster carers have been flexible to help us to provide placements to meet the needs of children. The majority of children have remained in placement with only moves taking place as a result of health needs of foster carer or care planning purposes.
51. Foster carers have continued to receive virtual support from their supervising social workers and have maintained buddying arrangements in place with other carers. They have facilitated a range of methods in encouraging contact between children and their families.
52. Supervising social workers have continued to progress prospective foster carers and provide virtual visits and training sessions. In line with the Adoption and Children (Corona Virus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 the fostering team have been unable to secure the provision of medical reports for prospective foster carers, as GP's have not been available to provide medical examinations. This flexibility has meant that prospective foster carers have been able to progress through the assessing stages albeit they will not be approved without the full medical report. The Designated Doctor for Looked After Children has worked with the medical adviser to the Fostering panel to plan for “virtual medicals”.

Adoption

53. Adoption Tees Valley has remained operational using remote means to engage adopters and liaise with assessing social workers in the local authority. For children who have an approved plan for Adoption, Family Finding is continuing, and children are being matched. Virtual matching panels are taking place with matches being recommended to the Agency Decision Maker for approval.
54. The Courts, not hearing adoption applications at this time, will ultimately generate delays in the making of Adoption Orders. The cohort of children are being tracked by the local authority and the data is being used to inform the Teesside Court Recovery Group as to the scheduling once the Courts commence hearing of cases.
55. Adoption Tees Valley have been awarded a grant from the DfE to enable our special guardians to have membership of Grandparents Plus for support and advice over the next 12 months.

Education

56. During the lockdown period daily meetings between the LA and the Regional Schools Commissioner have been in place, and daily updates have been issued to schools from Education Services. The updates include the latest attendance information, any new guidance or developments from DfE and any questions that have been raised with the DfE. In addition, the Education Strategy Group has been meeting weekly throughout the Covid-19 period.
57. Briefing sessions with the Director of Public Health and Public Health Principal have been accepted by all schools, colleges and early years settings. These sessions were very well received and education providers tell us that they have found them very useful.
58. The Educational Psychology Service has developed and provided resources for education colleagues on mental health issues, the recovery curriculum and critical incident management.
59. The Schools Forum met on 14 January and agreed the School Funding Formula, Growth Fund and central budgets for schools and early years for 2020/21. The 19th May meeting was cancelled due to lockdown restrictions, however the final budget position for 2019/20 was circulated and showed a continuing cumulative pressure in high needs budgets.

Schools Wider Reopening

60. Following the period of partial closures since 23 March, schools/settings were advised by the Government that Early Years settings and primary schools could reopen to pupils (Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6) from 1 June, with Secondary Schools following on for Year 10 and 12 from 15 June.
61. Schools, educational settings and early years childcare providers have completed risk assessments and have put in place a range of protective measures to ensure they can safely re-open to more children and staff. Schools will reopen to different year groups at different stages in June, based on their assessments. These re-openings will be purposely slow and considered, only building to a wider opening when schools are confident to do so and it is safe and right for children and families.

62. Parents are being notified by schools regarding re-open and the steps they have put in place to ensure social distancing guidance and safety measures can be followed.

Children's Commissioning and Contracts

63. Contract monitoring has been undertaken with private residential homes operating in Darlington. Out of the eight private residential homes, seven homes are Ofsted graded Good or Outstanding and one home is currently Requires Improvement (RI). The home graded RI is due to be inspected imminently. Officers from the Council have been monitoring progress against the home's Ofsted Improvement Plan, of which all actions are complete.
64. No matters of contractual compliance were identified and positive outcomes for children and young people were evidenced around self-development and holistic wellbeing. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic a robust RAG rated provider liaison and intelligence tracker has been in place with all external providers of care and support to Darlington Children and Young People, providers have worked in partnership with Council Officers to be innovative and solution focused to ensure service disruption remained to an absolute minimum.
65. Darlington have been successful in an application to be part of the 2020-21 sites to implement the proposals for new Mental Health Support Teams in schools as set out in the Children and Young People Mental Health Green Paper and Long-Term Plan for the NHS. This multi-agency work will progress in line with the funding allocation timescales and is a great example of positive joint commissioning work between our schools, the LA and Clinical Commissioning Group.

Darlington Safeguarding Partnership

66. Partners welcomed David Gallagher as the new Statutory Safeguarding Partner representing the Health Sector. David's appointment, as Chief Officer, follows a restructure of the North East Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCG). David has responsibility for the Tees Valley and Darlington CCG.
67. To maintain a strong oversight of safeguarding issues, the Statutory Safeguarding Partners have increased their meetings, to give them opportunity to consider safeguarding arrangements from across the sector and its partner organisations.
68. Updates have been provided from partners on business continuity measures they have implemented as a result of C-19. It was positive to see all agencies reporting good staffing levels during the peak and beyond, and some re-deploying staff to the front line where necessary. This has enabled service delivery to continue, with safeguarding remaining a priority.
69. Two additional multi-agency groups have been established during C-19:
 - Children's Critical Safeguarding Group
 - Adult Critical Safeguarding GroupThese groups ensure that safeguarding arrangements continue to be in place and are robust and effective to ensure the most vulnerable children, young people and adults in Darlington continue to be safeguarded. The groups have adapted practices

to ensure there is a multi-agency line of sight on the most vulnerable children, young people and adults.

70. All agencies report they are continually monitoring performance data to obtain an understanding of the changing landscape. Measures are being implemented by agencies to ensure recovery mechanisms are in place, which will be subject to government guidance, to establish what this will mean for service delivery going forward.
71. The Statutory Safeguarding Partners are now inviting key leads from partner organisations, to attend their meetings to appraise and assure them on the current position within their sectors, and will include mental health providers and education representatives.

Councillor Jon Clarke
Cabinet Member with Portfolio for Children and Young People