

# Walsall Childrens Services Our Covid-19 Story



Walsall Council

PROUD OF OUR PAST OUR PRESENT AND FOR OUR FUTURE

# Introduction

- Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the way that we work in children's services, with our children, young people and their families and schools.
- The Coronavirus Act 2020, a temporary law, came into force on Wednesday 25 March 2020 and outlined expectations for social work practice and other interactions with children, young people, families and schools including SEND and schools attendance. Subsequent amendments have been made to provide for extra flexibility in some circumstances that apply to Children's Services. These will only be used when absolutely necessary, with senior management oversight.
- We have responded to the changing landscape effectively through an agile approach to remote and home based working (using MS teams and Whatsapp for Business), while maintaining on-sight presence on a rota'd basis to provide essential support for staff, schools, children and families.
- In Walsall we have maintained services in line with statutory requirements and a range of proactive measures have enabled us to maintain high performance on the core elements of our work, this includes support for schools, assessments, responding to children who going missing, social work visits, support to care leavers and foster carer support.
- The Directors of Children's Services are required to have a minimum of weekly meetings with the Department of Education (DfE) and Ofsted on matters pertaining to safeguarding, school attendance, Early Years provision, Education Health and Care plans, SEND provision and other matters. A fortnightly DfE data return is also submitted.
- The Directors for Access & Inclusion, and Social Care have held weekly REACT meetings with DfE, RSC and HMI

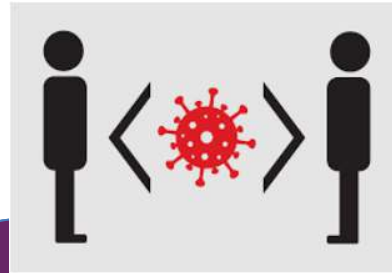
# We have adapted....

Children's Services staff have adapted swiftly and effectively to changes required in the way we work. Early adjustments coupled with a strong commitment to working with our families and schools has enabled us to remain focused on our most vulnerable children.



## Office based where required

Social Care Staff have working in 2 office settings as part of a rota and there are clear measures in place including hand and respiratory hygiene; increased cleaning of the environment; limiting movement and considering the safest means of travel and the use of personal protective equipment (PPE)



## Minimising contact

We have changed the way that we maintain contact with children and families, assessing risk to understand whether contact needs to be face to face visits or by virtual means. Capacity for visiting children and young people has remained sufficient throughout the pandemic.



## Virtual Meetings

Meetings are held virtually wherever possible to minimise contact and reduce the risk of any infection being spread between those in attendance. We are now developing hybrid meetings where a face to face meeting is required and fully involve children and their families in critical decisions.



# How it all began.....

In February 2020 Covid-19 began to circulate in Britain.

From the beginning of March 2020 we have seen 22 Confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Walsall schools.

Schools were closed for deep cleans if staff members or children had tested positive for Covid-19.

On March 19<sup>th</sup> 2020 the Government announced that schools would close on Friday 20<sup>th</sup> March to all children except those that are vulnerable or children of key workers.

From Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> March, the majority of Walsall Children's Services staff began to work from home.

From June 1st there was a wider reopening of schools for specific year groups, Rec Y1, Y2, Y10 and Y12.

Immediate plans were put into place to risk assess all children open across Children's Services.

Walsall Schools affected in the early days included:

- School one – closed for 2 days for deep clean
- School two – closed for 3 days due to staff shortages



# Impact of Covid-19 on demand activity

In the initial weeks of lockdown there was a 37% drop in the number of contacts into Early Help and a 32% drop in the number of referrals into social care.

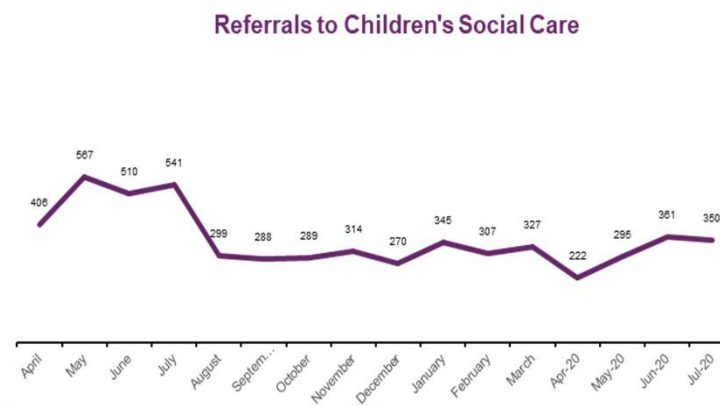
However, by May 2020, the number of referrals in social care had recovered to more usual levels. Between April and July 1,228 referrals were received compared with 1,249 between December and March – a decrease of just 1.7% overall. Early Help contacts remained low in May but had recovered to more usual levels by June.

We have seen a change in who is making referrals – between January and March 33% of referrals came from the Police. This has increased to 45% between April and June and was 47% in June. Prior to Covid-19 schools were our biggest referrers, however, there have been very few referrals from schools during lockdown.

The reasons that children are being referred has changed. The top seven reasons for referral remain the same but the percentage of referrals that feature domestic violence, neglect, drug use and alcohol misuse have increased, whereas the percentage of contacts that feature emotional abuse, physical abuse and mental health issues have decreased.

Due to changes in policing and the effective closure of the criminal courts, the numbers of young people entering the youth justice system for the first time has reduced by 66% (March to August 2020).

Contacts Leading to Referral			
Presenting need	Jan 20 – March 20	April 20 – June 20	Difference
Domestic Violence	65.8%	74.2%	+8.4% pts
Emotional Abuse	72.5%	65.8%	-6.7% pts
Neglect	37.6%	44.4%	+6.8% pts
Physical Abuse	38.1%	31.6%	-6.5% pts
Mental Health	21.7%	16.7%	-5.0% pts
Drug Use	15.7%	21.0%	+5.3% pts
Alcohol Misuse	14.5%	21.3%	+6.8% pts



# We understood the risks for our children

Within **two-weeks** of lockdown beginning we had reviewed and RAG rated all of the children that were open to social care, EHCP team and early help to understand the levels of risk associated with each of them. Individual visiting and contact plans were developed and these were reviewed by managers.

Children who were assessed as being at high risk, continued to receive face to face visits where possible and have been contacted most frequently throughout the pandemic. The percentage of visits conducted face to face has been increasing since lockdown restrictions began to ease.

We have maintained regular contact with all children in line with their plan and were able to share our risk-rating with partners and colleagues which enabled support to be tailored and carers were not overloaded.

Risk of reoffending - Young people assessed as high risk of re-offending received a home visit each week as per their court order or police disposal. All young people open to the Youth Justice Service received a minimum of weekly interventions via video technology.

90% of children are contacted by their social worker at least once every four weeks

Face to face visits

April – 25%  
August 65%

## Risk Levels



- 10% of children in need
- 40% of children subject of a Child Protection Plan
- 7% of children in care



- 40% of children in need
- 52% of children subject of a Child Protection Plan
- 13% of children in care



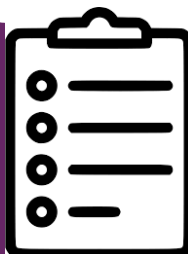
- 50% of children in need
- 8% of children subject of a Child Protection Plan
- 80% of children in care



# Adapting Our Practice

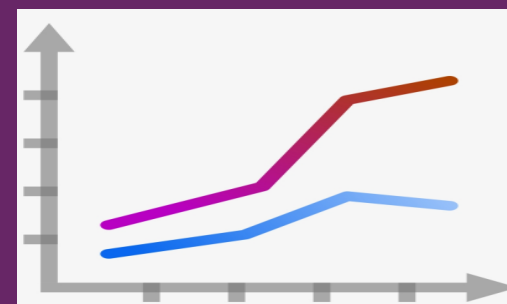
To be able to continue to assess children's needs and provide appropriate help and protection Children's Social Care Services have adapted and worked differently

Specific Covid-19 Practice Guidance has been developed to support professional decision-making and RAG rating risk assessment. This has been updated as lockdown restrictions have eased. This included:



- Key things to consider in assessing the impact of lockdown for families
- A Home Visit Risk Assessment tool
- Guidance on when physical visits were necessary and how to conduct these safely, including the use and disposal of PPE
- Good practice in undertaking virtual visits
- Holding virtual meetings
- Case recording so we can tell each child's story of professional involvement during Covid-19

A new system for using performance data has been launched during Covid-19, and key reporting tools have been developed to offer oversight of RAG ratings, assessments, visits and the frequency of contact with children and families.



Daily reports on staff attendance and those shielding have also been produced to understand our capacity alongside need.



# Staff Wellbeing

The welfare of our staff is of paramount importance. Our staff have been amazing in prioritising children, families and carers, and offering them help and support, but this has been difficult for them too. Our approach has centred on having shared guidance and policies, but also recognising individual support needs and agile working. Throughout the pandemic a range of approaches have been used to support staff and keep them safe.

## Checking In

All teams regularly hold check-in meetings, huddles and virtual breakfasts or lunches to maintain team relationships and co-working, and to be there for one another

## Feedback

Staff report that they feel listened to and supported, especially in their teams and with their colleagues. They know how to access support, including the Corporate offer

## Staff Briefings

Senior Managers have held regular virtual meetings for all Children's Social Care staff, including specific Team Manager sessions and Health Check / Feedback sessions

## Communication

Staff receive a weekly briefing with service changes, key updates, resources, and good news stories so communication all comes from one place where possible





# Family Safeguarding

Children's Social Care were due to launch it's new Family Safeguarding model with support form the DfE funded Stronger Families Safer Children Programme. The whole programme was paused in late March due to the pandemic.

After a period of uncertainty, a new provisional date for launching this model was agreed for September 1<sup>st</sup>.

Despite the pandemic and all the challenges this has created, this model has been successfully launched on 1<sup>st</sup> September across the Safeguarding and Family Support (now Family Safeguarding) Service. All the key components are now in place, and Social Workers and other professionals are starting to implement this new way of working.

10 Specialist Adult Practitioners have been recruited and started with the Family Safeguarding Service ready for the 1<sup>st</sup> September.

The pandemic has meant all training has had to be completed virtually, with smaller groups. Excluding new starters in August, over 90% of staff in the Family Safeguarding Teams have been trained in the model

All the Family Safeguarding Teams have been trained in Motivational Interviewing as the core practice method used in the model.



# Working with Children and Young People

Children's Social Care staff have worked tirelessly to engage children and young people throughout the pandemic, using many different creative approaches. Feedback has been this way of working requires more preparation, especially speaking to children and young people before meetings, but has enabled Social Workers and other professionals to keep their wishes and feelings at the heart of everything we do.

## MY 2020 COVID-19 TIME CAPSULE

### Using technology

Children and young people are often comfortable using technology, and many have responded well to visits using video calls, and done through tablets, phones and laptops.

Staff have used a variety of approaches such as playing games over the internet, drawing on the computer, putting tools to understand children's wishes on the screen, during these virtual visits.

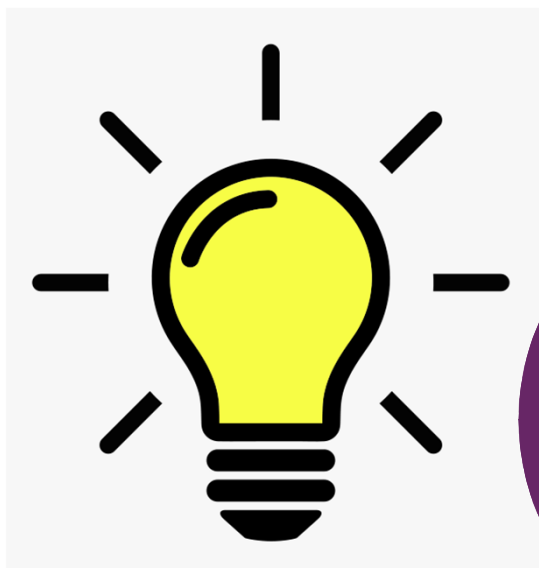
### Direct work – creative approaches have included:

- My Covid time capsules to help children tell their story of the pandemic
- Reading story books to children, and creating their own cartoon strips and stories
- Child friendly safety plans – especially online safety
- Going to socially distant walks with children, playing games outdoors where they can talk openly
- Using messaging games and talking via messaging again so children and young people can talk openly
- Adapting communication for disabled children

At the height of the pandemic Walsall like almost all Local Authorities moved to virtual family time. Feedback from children, young people and families was sought, and was very positive about the support they received from the Family Time Service at such a difficult time.



# Lessons Learned



We have learned a lot across the pandemic, and there are many things that we will continue to do.

Knowing ourselves – we have been able to meet the challenges of the pandemic because we have strong performance and data tracking processes and have audited our practice to understand strengths and address challenges in a responsive and timely way.

Microsoft Teams – this will help save time in travel. Especially where there is a time pressure such as professional Strategy Discussions where there are concerns about significant harm to a child.

Virtual visits and meetings  
We will always visit children and young people in person in line with our statutory responsibilities, but where it is in a child's interests (with some children in care for example) we will hold some meetings virtually and make video calls to encourage their participation.

The culture of staff wellbeing and feedback has been fundamental to our response to Covid, and our staff want this continue to be a focus – and it is.

Online training can be done really effectively, and a range of methods and learning approaches will be used to offer development opportunities to staff.



# Carrying On

The pandemic has created lots of challenges, but we are committed to providing as full a service as possible and safe for children, families, carers and staff.

Face-to-face family time has resumed for some families where it is safe to do so and in the children's best interests, with this being risk assessed for every child and family, and every family time session.

All Social Work Assessments once-again involve a face-to-face contact, and a visit to the family home

The Transitions and Leaving Care Service Building is reopening to have this hub open for Care Leavers to drop in.

Some Child Protection Conferences are now being held as physical meetings, and using a combination of a physical meeting which parents and the child where appropriate may attend, and video links or telephone calls

Some key meetings are now happening face-to-face where it is safe to do so, and there is a need such as where sensitive information is being discussed

Staff supervision is now happening in person where possible using social distancing, supported by virtual methods as needed

Recruitment activity has continued with over 50 appointments in Children's Social Care, including 34 newly qualified ASYE Social Worker being appointed and starting with WMBC in August and September

Walsall has continued to take Social Work students and offer a positive and safe learning experience can be provided. This has included supporting students whose placements had to be ended elsewhere because of lockdown to successfully complete Social Work qualifications. There are currently 7 students on placement with plans for 23 across the year.



# Impact of Covid-19 on demand activity

Our numbers of children in care have increased over the Covid-19 period. While some of this activity has been expected and is part of business as usual, some of the increase is due to reduced court activity:



- Children have remained on interim care orders for longer.
- Court applications for revocation of care orders have not been prioritised.
- Fewer children have secured adoption, special guardianship or child arrangement orders.
- Family courts have had to adjust to remote hearings with urgent matters prioritised.
- Contested final hearings which required parents to give evidence could not take place virtually. Therefore a number of final hearings were delayed. These are now being prioritised and are taking place via hybrid hearings (with one or more of the participants attending court to give their evidence).
- Although the Youth Criminal Court has now been re-established on a limited basis, there remains a significant backlog of young people at different points in the system that are yet to receive an outcome



# Impact of Covid-19 on demand activity

Although the overall numbers of children coming in care have increased, there has been some decrease in the numbers of children coming into care. The reasons for are being analysed as the impact of Covid-19 continues to be felt, although whilst this is in part due to the effects of the pandemic, it also is due the efforts to provide effective help and support for families across the crisis.

	1st March - 31st August	
	2019	2020
Children coming into care	126	108
Subject to a care order	58	51
Subject to a SGO	8	18
Subject to an adoption order	10	1
Returned home	20	9

Children in Care Review meetings have been held virtually throughout the pandemic. This has been a real positive, especially for children living further away, and actually a number of children and young people report preferring this approach, with high rates of participation.

- Care Plans for children in care have continued to be progressed throughout the pandemic to ensure that their needs are met.
- There has been an increase in SGOs – orders where children live with a Special Guardian, often in their family or extended networks.
- Although there have been challenges, 9 children have returned home between March and August of this year, and as lockdown has ended more plans for children to safely return to their families are being taken forwards.



# Innovative approaches to support

The constraints of lockdown have meant that we have often had to find innovative approaches to maintaining contact with some of our most vulnerable young people.

Socially distanced walks, combining contact with the young person's daily exercise and providing privacy for difficult conversations



Support for care leavers and vulnerable families including delivering shopping, nappies, formula and collecting prescriptions



Delivering resources and intervention activities to young people and families in their homes so workers can support completion via video technology



Emotional and well-being support, combined with practical help such as virtual cooking sessions and how to sessions on assembling flat-packed furniture



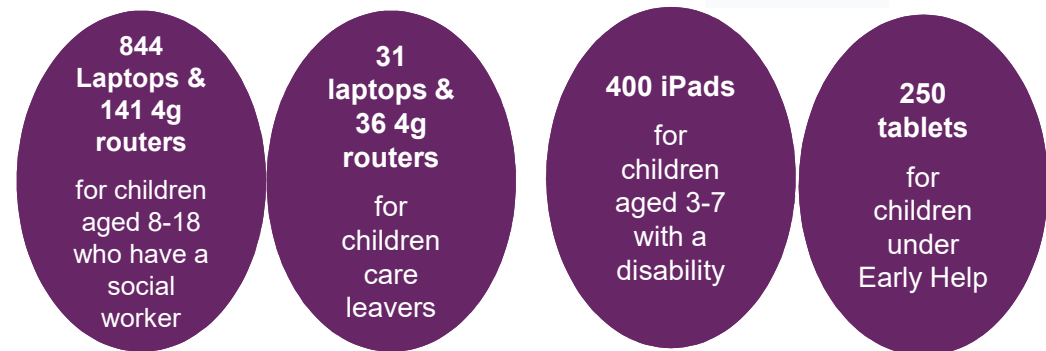
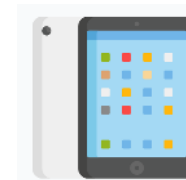
# Work of the Virtual School and Distribution of Laptops

The Virtual School for looked after children:

- Worked with social workers to ensure children and young people were supported to continue to access education
- Completed a risk assessment for every young person with an EHC plan
- Provided a named key worker for every young person
- Regularly contacted parents/carers and schools for those not attending schools to ensure access to learning
- Provided careers advice to students about GCSE and A level results
- Delivered face to face and online transition support to children moving to new schools

The government arranged for laptops and tablets to be provided for vulnerable children so that they could continue to access education if they were not able to attend school.

Children's services worked closely with ICT to configure, secure and deliver the kit to families, also providing 4g dongles where required to enable the children and young people to access the internet.



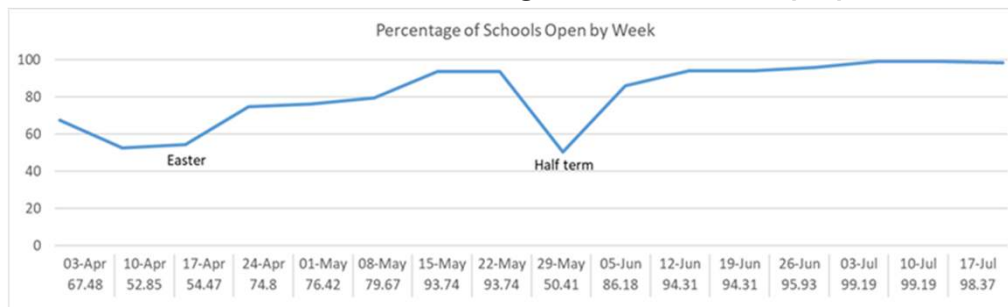


# We supported schools.....

We worked closely with schools to ensure that they could continue to remain open for vulnerable pupils and pupils whose parents were key workers, supporting and co-ordinating a 'hub resilience model' so that if a school had to close, then children could attend other schools within the hub.

Regular, virtual 'Teachmeet' sessions were held with schools to ensure that communication remained open and best practice could be shared.

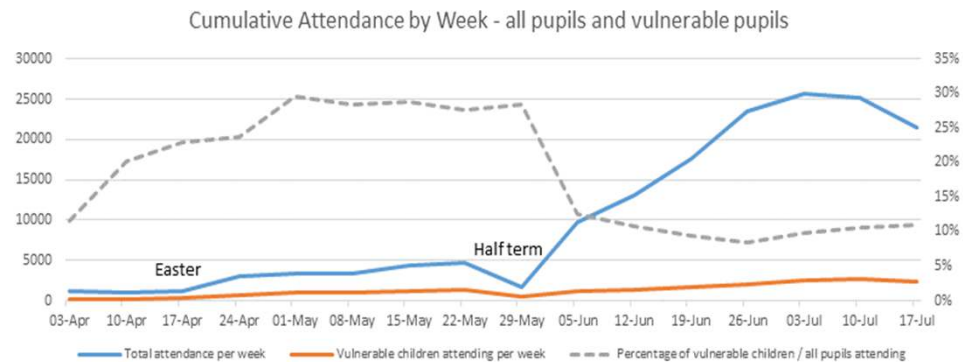
Daily returns were obtained from schools to monitor attendance and also confirm that schools were undertaking safe and well checks for pupils, particularly those who were most vulnerable. This was used to inform the RAG rating of vulnerable pupils.



**Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> July 2020 –**  
**6813 (12.8%) children attended school**

- Reception – 1134 (29.7%)
- Year 1 - 1133 (29.3%)
- Year 6 – 1271 (32.7%)
- Year 10 – 301 (8.5%)
- Year 12 – 66 (3.6%)

Of the total number of pupils attending school between April and July in Walsall, **18%** were vulnerable children



# We supported children with an EHCP

We have continued to talk to parents and carers about how their child's assessment or plan may be affected by Covid-19. We have communicated with parents individually (via phone and letter/email) to discuss potential and known delays in the EHC process due to COVID-19. All decisions are being made with parents/carers to reduce concern.

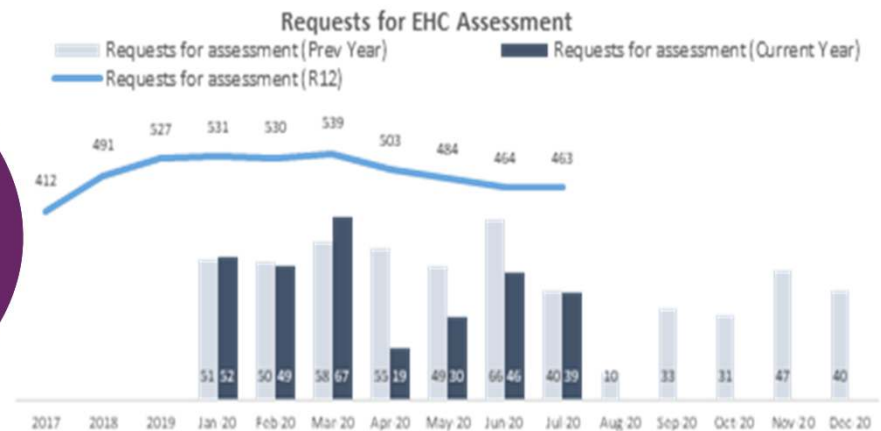
Where children have a plan in place, schools have undertaken risk assessments in partnership with parents to discuss whether it is better for the child to remain at home or attend school and identify what additional support may be required. Schools have been making 'Safe and Well' calls to parents at least once a week.

In addition to our work with schools, a help line was established for parents and carers of children with SEN who were struggling to cope, who had concerns or who were anxious about their children returning to school.

EHC requests have continued to be supported remotely and the number has reduced each month during Covid from 539 (March) to 463 (July). It is expected to increase as pupils return to school in September.

**81% of children with an EHCP were risk assessed as being better supported at home**

**91% of children with an EHCP were receiving safe and well checks at least once a week**



## Early Help have proactively worked with partners to prevent additional demand on children's social care .....

- Worked proactively with partners to support children and young people to prevent additional demand on children's social care, including
- Identifying with schools those vulnerable children and young people who required additional support over the summer period.
- Our partners provided additional targeted support to children and families around domestic abuse, trauma, health & wellbeing, finance
- Social workers to ensure children and young people were supported to continue to access education
- Completed a risk assessment for every young person with an EHC plan
- Provided a named key worker for every young person
- Regularly contacted parents/carers and schools for those not attending schools to ensure access to learning
- Secured 250 laptops and tablets in partnership with Virtual schools and police for children and young people being supported by Early Help so that they could continue to access education if they were not able to attend school.
- Worked closely with ICT to configure, secure and deliver the kit to families, also providing 4g dongles where required to enable the children and young people to access the internet

Completed a risk assessment for every young person with an EHC plan

Facilitated 5 webinars for partners to help support children and young people around domestic abuse and trauma

Held 36 regular check in's with staff to tighten communication and support networks

Delivered '8 Restorative Training' workshops to schools and partners, with over 300 attendees

Our internal teams co ordinated and kept in touch with over 700 children and young people



# Early help have supported children, young people parents and carer's .....

- Produced 'top tips' for parents around understanding your child, emotional wellbeing, how to have fun
- Delivered a wide range of on line summer activities for children and young people
- Held virtual coffee morning for parents and carers with children who have additional needs, providing opportunities for support and to share information
- Held small group sessions to support emotional health and reduce anxiety
- Held weekly virtual group sessions for children and young people
- Delivered borough wide 'Live Music Project' an opportunity for children
- Provided careers advice to students about GCSE and A level results
- Delivered face to face and online transition support to children moving to new schools
- Held weekly locality based virtual 'Time to Talk' workgroups for schools and partners to share concerns, proactive approaches, good practice

We have facilitated 21 'meet and greet' sessions for all partners to share what services, help and support is available for both practitioners, children, young people and their families during this time

Delivered over 50 on line parenting support interactive sessions with a follow up Q&A session to further support parents/carers. All resources continue to be available both on line and converted to picture format for those without internet access.

Continued to deliver face to face, on line support to over 800 children and young people open to Early Help

# Home to School transport supported children and families by .....

## Home to School transport

- Continued to transport vulnerable pupils throughout the pandemic
- 46 different educational establishments.
- Additional resources provided to deliver welfare packs, PPE and associated support.
- Worked with PHW to publish guidelines to operators
- Attended 2 x zoom sessions with FACE.
- Team meet daily for updates
- Coordinated the return to school programme for H2S transport
- Approx 700 pupils to return in September
- Facilitated webinar for Operators with PHW for return to school based on government guidelines

2803 pupils were supported during the period.

NHS staff were supported as part of a joint venture and co ordinated through the H2S school transport team approximately 80 staff.

Around 700 pupils will be supported to return to school in September



# Working Together

Regular communication and shared working between Children's Social Care, Education and Early Help was also key:

- Information was shared in a safe and appropriate way to make sure RAG ratings of vulnerable children in different service areas were considered alongside each other and needs and risks identified.
- A tracker was kept and there was daily updating of children with Children's Social Care involvement attending education and Social Workers and Schools worked together to encourage attendance of vulnerable pupils
- A number of schools worked creatively with the Children With Disabilities Team to adapt support for disabled children and their families during lockdown.
- Professionals including Social Worker, Early Help Practitioners, Teachers, Health Visitors and Midwives and others have worked together to coordinate visits and communication to make sure that the professional network has regular contact with children and families, but also so this didn't become too much.
- Across the Safeguarding Partnership weekly newsletters have been sent out with helpful guidance, tools and information to support the partnership and effective partnership working.
- Weekly meetings have taken place with key partnership safeguarding leads to discuss any emerging challenges or issues that have arisen as a result of Covid-19.

# Moving forward into reset.....

## Review of Staff who have been shielding

Risk assessments and work plans will include the planned return to work of team members who are no longer required to shield, whilst shielding staff will continue to work remotely in line with existing arrangements

## Increasing Face to Face contact

We have begun to increase face to face contacts with children and families, while maintaining elements of virtual practice that have been beneficial to both staff and parents and carers where this is appropriate

## Developed a Reset Framework for Schools

We have developed a reset framework with schools with a focus on mental health and emotional resilience as they support pupils to re-enter education

