

Title of the Report:

Children's Services response to Children Looked After and Care experienced young people to Covid-19.

Executive Summary:

This report provides an update summarising Children's Services response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and to provide assurance as to how we will continue to work with partners to meet the needs of children in care children, young people and their families during the course of the Pandemic.

Reason for bringing to the Corporate Parenting Board:

To ensure that the Board is fully informed of the way that Children's Services have responded to the needs of children in care and care experienced young people during the Covid-19 lockdown

Recommendations:

- 1. The Board notes the response to the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to children in care and care experienced young people.**

Background papers:

None

Corporate Parenting Pledges

See appendix 1

Resource and legal considerations:

The Coronavirus Act 2020 is a temporary law that came into force on Wednesday 25 March 2020 and impacts on social work practice. Subsequent amendments have been made to provide for extra flexibility in some circumstances that apply to Children's Services.

Some of measures we have put in place have financial implications. We are looking to minimise these and ensure they are reflected in the Council's overall assessment of the impact of Covid – 19 on the delivery of the budget.

We continue to work closely with our HR partners during the pandemic, supported by them to use our workforce flexibly and creatively to retain continuity of service.

Council Corporate Plan Priorities:

- Children have the best possible start and are safe from harm, happy, healthy and learning well.

- People have increased independence, improved health and can positively contribute to their communities.
- Communities are prospering and resilient with all housing needs met in safe and healthy places that build a strong sense of belonging and cohesion.

Citizen impact:

The services and the improvements play a key role in the quality of life and outcomes for the children, young people and families of Walsall. The Council and its partners as Corporate Parents make critical contributions to improve outcomes.

Environmental impact:

We continue to work with our corporate colleagues to mitigate an impact on the environment during the course of the pandemic.

Performance management:

A performance dashboard was developed which evidenced:

- Rag rating of children's plans to inform the level of support required
- The number of our children attending school
- Visiting frequency and how children were seen and contacted

The Performance Board has continued to meet to maintain an overview and has included

- Audits and dip sampling was undertaken by managers to ensure that support was proportionate to need.
- Business continuity arrangements remain robust with continued delivery of core statutory services
- Recruitment is progressing well to agreed additional capacity.

Reducing inequalities:

The Corporate Parenting Strategy sets out the response to secure improvements in the equality of services, which, when achieved will have a positive impact on our most vulnerable children, young people and families. By being effective Corporate Parents for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, we collectively seek to redress the disadvantage that looked after children and care leavers face.

Consultation:

Staff have been consulted through supervision, unit and well-being meetings as well as the Council's staff survey.

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1.0 Background

- 1.1** For Children's Services Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the way that we work, with our children and young people and their families. We were able to respond to the changing landscape effectively in part due to the agile approach to working which was in place to support remote and home based working. Those early adjustments coupled with strong commitment to working with our families has enabled us to remain focused on our most vulnerable children.
- 1.2** Children's Services staff have equally adapted swiftly and effectively to changes required in the way we work specially visiting and supporting interventions. We have identified and risk-rated children and young people and established clear guidance for visiting and coordinating work and support, both face-to-face and virtually, dependant on need and risk.
- 1.3** 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 assessments, responding to children who going missing, social work visits and foster carer support.
- 1.4** 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. This is a useful measure of our performance.
- 1.5** The Coronavirus Act 2020 is a temporary law that came into force on Wednesday 25 March 2020 and impacts on social work practice. 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.

2.0 Resilience - sustaining services through minimising infection:

- 2.1** During the pandemic workforce capacity has remained within our acceptable range to deliver a safe service with most staff being available to work. A daily tracker is in place that allows for oversight. We continue to take seriously the Government guidance about minimising infection.
- 2.2** By the end of March both Townend House and TLC Hub were temporality closed and we moved to Fallings Heath from where small number of staff across the Fostering, Family Time; Corporate Parenting; TLC and Residential Services have worked from based on a rota. The vast majority of staff have worked at home including those staff who are self isolating either because they were vulnerable or were shielding.
- 2.3** We have had to adapt working practices, including how offices are arranged to embrace the following:

- **Minimising contact** with other staff and with children and families by changing the way that we maintain contact with them, risk assessing this contact as to whether this is to be by face to face visits or other virtual means. Capacity for visiting children and young people has remained sufficient.
- **Office based:** Staff have working in office setting 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)
- **Virtual Meetings** - meetings will continue to be held virtually wherever possible to minimise contact and reduce the risk of any infection being spread between those in attendance. We are developing hybrid meetings where a face to face meeting is required and fully involve children and their families in critical decisions.
- **Review of Staff Currently 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

3.0 Our response in practice

- 3.1 By the end of March, managers had in conjunction with social workers risk assessed and risk rated each child's care plan to identify visiting patterns and support. Each child's care plan was reviewed by a manager, as well as those that have been reviewed through normal statutory review, child protection conference and child in need processes. 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.
- 3.2 All of our children and young people have been contacted either virtually or where appropriate/ necessary face to face visits have been undertaken particular where additional support has been needed. Children's reviews have continued to be held virtually and it is anticipated that this will continue over the summer. Reviewing officers have reported good examples of the quality of social work input, despite the challenges of working differently.
- 3.3 Over the three months the number of children in care has increased to over 690 children and there are more children remaining on interim care orders longer. Court applications for revocation of care orders have not been prioritised. This has meant that fewer children have secured adoption, special guardianship or child arrangement orders. Family courts have had to adjust to remote hearings and though these are taking place the courts are prioritising more urgent matters. Where it has been possible to conclude hearings these have taken place but most final hearings have needed to be rescheduled, particularly where parents and/or other witnesses need to be called. Consideration to conducting hybrid hearings (with one or more of the participants attending court to give their evidence) is been given subject to availability of a suitable venue and the requirements of social distancing regulations
- 3.4 Children's health assessments have been undertaken virtually, though some have also taken place face to face where this has been necessary. Children's Personal Education Plans have been completed to ensure that we understand the goals and aspirations for our children. Sadly, a number of care leavers experienced loss of employment or training or their apprenticeships have been suspended or their vocational courses have not been available on line and is reflected in the increase of young people who are not in education or training.

- 3.5** There are many examples of innovative and empathetic approaches and responses, great flexibility, and a willingness to develop new ways of working to maintain relationship-based practice. Staff have seen children and young people living locally but also those who are living at a distance. Examples of face to face contact has included socially distanced walks, which provided the necessary privacy and time needed for difficult conversations. Staff have tracked and looked for children missing from care jointly with the Police.
- 3.6** A small number of children have moved to new homes during the pandemic, particularly where they have struggled to adhere social distancing rules or have been missing which resulted in either identifying new homes for them or providing additional staffing support so as to keep them, other children and staff safe.
- 3.7** Care leavers have been regularly contacted virtually and door step visits have been undertaken for those who are more vulnerable or self-isolating. At the start of the pandemic Personal Advisors worked tirelessly to shop and source basic supplies for care leavers, due to the shortage in shops this was not an easy task. However, we ensured that we were able to provide basic supplies and delivery food parcels for the young people who needed them as the lock down was announced. We ensured that all of our young parents were provided with nappies, milk and other basics so that they would not need to worry about having to go out. A big worry for young people has also been finance so we have we have moved to direct payments into their bank accounts
- 3.8** Most care leavers have preferred video and phone calls. The majority of care leavers have had weekly or fortnightly contact but for some young people they have need daily contact. Our more vulnerable young people have had additional support from support workers for asylum seeking young people and those young people who were at risk of becoming homeless or rough sleeping. Door-step visits have been undertaken when Young People have struggled to get out and needed to be seen. We have worked in partnership with Housing Rough Sleeper Team to access support as well as other key partners.
- 3.9** Personal Advisors have ensured that young people understood the Government guidance, reminded them about the need to adhere to it and kept them updated as guidance evolved and changed. We sourced guidance in different languages to ensure that those who were not fluent in English also understood what they need to do be keep safe. This has enabled us to ensure that there has been a trusted adult that they were able to turn to. Personal Advisors have “checked-in” and the main focus of this support has been emotional support at a time when anxieties have been high and isolation has been a real issue, particularly for those young people living alone with little family or peer support.
- 3.10** Young people have been supported young people to access mental health/emotional well-being services and have ‘virtually’ sat in on sessions to offer support. There have been activities such virtual cooking sessions and guidance with self-assembly furniture, usually this would have been done together in person but has worked well virtually. We have received many photographs of the other things they have then gone onto cook independently.
- 3.11** We ensured that all children with a social worker, including care experienced young people, have been provided with laptops through the Government scheme and through the Virtual School and this has enabled children and young people to access on line learning and keep in touch with the others as well as reduce isolation.

3.12 As lock down restrictions have started to ease face to face visits and family time is gradually increasing between children and their parents both within the community and in the centre. Over the last few weeks more children are being placed with their adopters or families and reunification plans for children are now progressing as we are now able to facilitate overnight stays with families. Care leavers are now moving into housing accommodation as the restrictions have started to ease.

4.0 Visits and contacts.

4.1 Adjustments to Mosaic and recording has enabled us to have monitor and maintain an overview of the frequency and type of contact with children and young people. Since May 2020, Vulnerable Children and Young People reports have been submitted to the Department of Education on a fortnightly basis.

4.2 Children looked after; For the reporting period between 29 June and 26 July 2020:

- 79 % of children looked after had been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last 2 weeks
- 98.4 % of children looked after had been seen or contacted by their social worker in the last 4 weeks

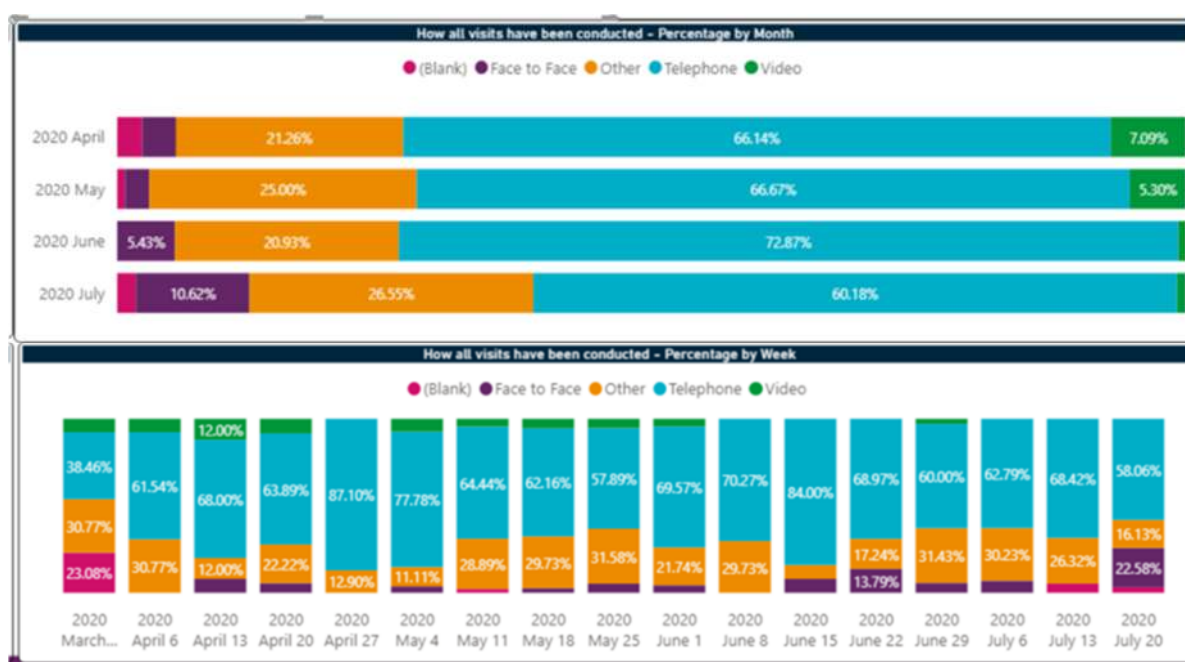
4.3 The table below shows how visits were conducted and shows that face to face visits have increased as we have started to ease out of lockdown.



4.4 Care Leavers: For the reporting period between 29 June and 26 July 2020:

- 70.2 % of care leavers had been seen or contacted by their personal advisor in the last 2 weeks
- 97 % of care leavers had been seen or contacted by their personal advisor in the last 4 weeks

4.5 The table below shows how contact with care leavers has been conducted.



5.0 Family Time Service

5.1 Although face to face family time ceased in the majority of situations, a digital contact plan was put in place for each child and family to support the facilitation of virtual contacts. Staff have been creative in enabling parents to remain connected with their children, for example, workers have been using video calls to try and involve parents in the bath time and bedtime routines of children who have been removed from their care. Staff have also provided parents and foster carers with considerable emotional support in times of heightened uncertainty, anxiety and loss. For some older children family time needed to be maintained to promote placement stability and this has been facilitated with adherence to Government guidance

5.2 The Family Time service continued to provide videos/photographs of parents to children so children could include these in their life story work. The presentations and discussions reminded us of the speed at which systems and services have been forced to adapt, and the impact on everyone, - children, parents, and foster carers as well as professionals.

5.3 We have worked with Research in Practice to inform our practice over the last 3 months and the approach of the service has been commended. An evaluation of how we have responded to family time has taken place and feedback from parents and carers is evidenced high levels of satisfaction. Significantly, the relationships between foster carer and parents have developed and vastly improved.

5.4 As of the 20th July we have now started to support face to face family time and this will be a graduated approach.

6.0 Supporting our foster carers:

6.1 During the lockdown many foster carers had to consider a number of factors to enable them to keep the children safe as well as their families. Although schools were open for 'vulnerable children' who had a social worker, most foster carers chose to keep their children at home as many of them were shielding or caring for someone who needed

to be shielded. This picture has changed as schools began to re-open and we saw more children going to school.

- 6.2** Whilst school based learning has been interrupted by the pandemic, many children have been limited to the house and garden, unable to see their own parents and other siblings. Recognising the additional pressures on foster carers there has been a tailored approach to supporting each fostering household based on a risk assessment and the levels of support required from the social workers, the Virtual School and schools.
- 6.3** Some foster carers have reported that despite the restrictions there have been many positives. Children have benefited from the slower pace of life and things have been calmer. Carers have not been juggling school runs or after-school activities. There are fewer engagements with social workers and other professionals. Children have been supported with their lessons at home and have worked at their pace.
- 6.4** We are maintaining our current standards, we have agreed to continue with business as usual with our practice in respect of assessments, reviews, panel approvals, including emergency carer assessments. Fostering panels have continued to operate virtually and carefully considered suitability of applications if there is any delay in receiving medical information.

7.0 Children's Homes

- 7.1** The temporary closure of one of our homes enabled Redruth and Hilton Road to maintain staffing levels as staff were deployed to cover those staff who were shielding. Just as in other care settings the resilience of children's homes has been tested by Covid-19, as services strived to function against the risks of illness, staff shortages, and increased workloads. Children's homes had to adapt quickly to the crisis, with support from government guidance as it has been released. Within Walsall Children's Homes staff have worked hard to ensure that the children were supported with a robust programme of activities and support with school work as well as emotional support. Children's birthdays have been celebrated where staff have worked on their day off to prepare that young person's favourite meal.
- 7.2** All Children's Homes had taken steps to limit footfall, for example by not using external staff, longer shift patterns and limiting the number of staff that worked in the home. Staff morale has been positive. Visitors to the Homes have been restricted and where absolutely necessary social workers would visit in the garden or through the window, or go for a walk but usually these visits were via phone or video call.
- 7.3** Emotional wellbeing of our children has been closely monitored and access to CAMHS advice and support has remained in situ. Some of our young people have used the period to their advantage and developed new skills in cooking, fitness classes and maintaining employment, completing Covid-19 time capsules, home based learning has been positive with the support of the school. Many of our children have not been able to spend time with family and friends. The use of digital technology particularly the use of Teams and WhatsApp has enabled children to remain in regular phone contact with those they cared about.
- 7.4** The experiences of most of our children in independent children's homes mirrors and has been similar, though some of our young people have really struggled with the restrictions over the lockdown period. Some of our children are worried about the virus and anxious about returning to school. Overall fewer children have gone missing from care since the lockdown began.

8.0 Our Re-set Plans

8.1 We are seeking to reopen TLC Hub over August particularly at a time when a number of new social workers will commence working with us. Our key priorities are:

- Increasing face to face visits, progressing plans which had been paused for our children and young people safely and with appropriate risk assessments in place.
- Supporting our children and their carers to enable children to be in school when they reopen in September 2020
- Support our young people to move into their accommodation as housing accommodation becomes available.
- Social Workers are scheduling formal reviews for children so that the environmental factors of the pandemic are taken into account in up to date assessments of need and risk.
- Work with local courts to ensure all delayed court cases progress at earliest opportunity and to ensure that there is a system in place to prioritise those children that require an earlier hearing to progress their plan of permanence.