

DECISION REPORT

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 22 June 2020

Report Title: Children's Services' Response to COVID-19

Portfolio Holder: Cllr Kathryn Flavell, Portfolio Holder for Children and Families

Senior Officer: Mark Palethorpe, Executive Director of People

1. Report summary

- 1.1. This report provides a summary of the work of Children's Services in response to the current national and international public health emergency on COVID-19.
- 1.2. These are unprecedented times for the Council, and for our children, young people and families.
- 1.3. We have many challenges ahead. COVID-19 is and will continue to have a significant impact on our children, young people and families. The strain of COVID-19 and lockdown has increased pressures for families, with some facing redundancy. The mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and families has been affected. Children and young people have missed out on education. Lockdown has reduced the visibility of children, allowing harm to remain hidden. The likely economic recession that will follow as a result of COVID-19 will increase the number of children living in poverty and will exacerbate the current inequalities. The legacy of this will be an increased demand for services over the next year but also in the longer term, with an increased cost to the Council and the partnership.

2. Recommendation/s

- 2.1 Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note:
- The progress to date,
 - The issues outlined in this report, and
 - The financial implications of COVID-19 to date and to continue to lobby Government to fund the total financial impact of the pandemic.

3. Reasons for Recommendation/s

- 3.1. To enable members to scrutinise arrangements for children to ensure we have the right support in place to help children achieve the best outcomes. To put on public record a summary of our response to date. To explain the financial implications and the ongoing pressures due to COVID-19.

4. Other Options Considered

- 4.1. Not applicable.

5. Background

- 5.1 Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause respiratory illness. On 31 December 2019, a cluster of pneumonia cases of unknown cause was reported in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. The novel coronavirus has been named by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as 'severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2' (SARS-CoV-2), while the coronavirus disease associated with it is referred to as COVID-19¹.
- 5.2 As with other respiratory illnesses, symptoms of COVID-19 can include a runny nose, loss of smell, sore throat, cough, and fever. It can be more severe for some people and can lead to pneumonia or breathing difficulties. More rarely, the disease can be fatal. Older people, and people with pre-existing medical conditions (such as diabetes and heart disease) appear to be more vulnerable to becoming severely ill with the virus².

¹ [https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-2019\)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it](https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/technical-guidance/naming-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-2019)-and-the-virus-that-causes-it)

² <https://www.who.int/news-room/q-a-detail/q-a-coronaviruses>

- 5.3 On 3 March 2020, the government published its coronavirus action plan which was based on four strategic phases – contain; delay, research; and mitigate.
- 5.4 On 12 March 2020, the government published its ‘Stay at home’ guidance which set out what individuals should do if they experienced coronavirus symptoms, however mild. At this point the government recognised that the virus was spreading generally throughout the country and could no longer be contained through international travel restrictions and by contact tracing around suspected or confirmed cases. In terms of its action plan, this signified the shift from ‘contain’ to ‘delay’.
- 5.5 Following announcements in relation to the closure of schools, pubs and restaurants, a UK-wide lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020, backed by police powers to enforce social distancing and closure regulations.
- 5.6 Emergency legislation was introduced and passed in just four days, with the Coronavirus Act 2020 receiving Royal Assent on 25 March 2020. The legislation gives further powers to government to slow the spread of the virus; reduce the resourcing and administrative burden on public bodies; and limit the impact of potential staffing shortages on the delivery of public services.
- 5.7 The government has made a number of announcements in relation to supporting local government financially, either by making available additional funding or by bringing forward previously announced funding programmes³. In terms of additional funding, the government has made available two amounts of £1.6 billion COVID-19 grant, announced on 19 March and 18 April 2020. Hardship funding to support local council tax support schemes was announced on 11 March 2020 totalling £500 million.
- 5.8 On 11 May 2020, the government published ‘Our plan to rebuild: the UK Government’s COVID-19 recovery strategy’. This set out a five-point scale to indicate the level of threat posed by COVID-19 to society and a phased approach to recovery, with incremental steps to relax control and public protection measures.

³ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/insights/coronavirus-support-for-local-government/>

6. Children's Services' Response to COVID-19

- 6.1 Children's services have continued to operate to ensure our children and families are supported during this time. Services have been creative and have adapted to be able to offer support remotely, for example our parenting journey is being offered through our Facebook page, with online tips, videos, advice and activities, receiving very positive feedback from parents. We have established new procedures across Children's Services to ensure that children are effectively safeguarded and supported which are available on our COVID-19 page on Centranet for all Children and Families staff. Some services have continued offering face to face support to ensure our most vulnerable children are safe.
- 6.2 Almost all our schools and some early years settings have remained open for the children of key workers and those defined as vulnerable. We have had positive feedback and thanks from the NHS for providing places for all their key workers.
- 6.3 Government Guidance has been changing rapidly, and services have needed to be responsive and flexible, working closely and supportively with our partners to implement changes.
- 6.4 We have been able to support our NHS colleagues during this time by enabling Midwifery services to be run through our Children's Centres. This has meant these services have been able to be provided in safe places in local communities, rather than in busy local hospitals.

Children's Social Care

- 6.5 At the outbreak of COVID-19, we assessed all cases open to Prevention and Children's Social Care, RAG rated the risk to children, and reviewed plans in light of the new situation. All children who were assessed as high risk have had face to face visits to ensure they are effectively safeguarded. Weekly operational meetings were established to discuss high risk children to ensure the right support is place for these children and there is senior manager oversight of those most at risk. Support is being provided in line with the DfE guidance for Children's Social Care which acknowledges that meetings and contact with families may need to take place in alternative ways.

- 6.6 All partners in the Safeguarding Children Partnership have affirmed that safeguarding children remains a key priority and weekly meetings were established to ensure the partnership offer is strong and we can respond flexibly to emerging needs or building pressures for individual agencies. This includes support and challenge between agencies as required.
- 6.7 Maintaining contact with children continues to be a multi-agency priority, with other key professionals involved with the family remaining in contact with children as well as social workers. School and early years settings have been crucial in this and we have a rolling process of contacting all schools and settings on a weekly basis to discuss any concerns. This has supported strong relationships between services.
- 6.8 Education, Prevention and Children's Social Care have been working in partnership to support vulnerable children to attend schools and settings. We are working together with families and encouraging attendance, and as a result, the number of vulnerable children attending schools and settings continues to increase. Helplines have been established for practitioners and families to contact and report any issues in returning vulnerable children to school which are enabling quick resolutions.
- 6.9 Cared for children and care leavers have been impacted by COVID-19. Some children who are currently in the Public Law Outline (PLO) process will experience significant delays of between 3-6 months in agreeing their permanency plan as a result of COVID-19. This is due to challenges for the Court in delivering fair justice for complex cases where there is a finding of fact or final hearing. Children who are at most acute risk due to the delay in achieving permanence are children with a plan of adoption, and children who are not currently living in their long-term placement.
- 6.10 The number of cared for children is likely to increase due to Coronavirus and the resulting challenges in progressing children's care plans. We have been working to ensure placement stability for children and young people is maintained throughout this time. In line with DfE guidance, where it is in their best interests to do so some cared for young people who have turned 18, and some care leavers, have remained in their placement to ensure they are safe. We have contingency plans in place to ensure we will have sufficient places for cared for children and care leavers.

- 6.11 As some children and young people will be staying in placements longer than they would otherwise, this will be a continued upward pressure on cared for children expenditure. We have seen an increase in the use of external foster care placements. It is likely that there will be increased demand for placements, and there is a risk that providers will uplift placement costs in response. Foster carer allowances have been temporarily increased to support the additional costs of having children at home as a result of coronavirus, and we have increased the support available to foster carers through regular phone contact, which carers have appreciated. As time progresses, it is likely that the increase in costs as a result of COVID-19 will rise further.
- 6.12 We are continuing to support children who are on the edge of care to prevent children coming into care where possible. We are continuing our work on Bespoke, and three of our four children's homes are now registered with Ofsted and are caring for Cheshire East children and young people who have previously been living out of borough or in independent residential settings. We plan to have the fourth home fully mobilised by July, and collectively this will provide 12 homes for children in Cheshire East with a greater potential to achieve much better outcomes as a result of being back in their communities. Staff from our children's homes are providing intensive support to some children and young people who are currently in residential care, in order to support them to return home long term.
- 6.13 Following the outbreak of COVID-19, the Children with Disabilities, Fostering Services, and parents of disabled children, risk assessed the Short Break Carers overnight support service. The risk of infection to the group of our most vulnerable children was seen as significant and a decision was made to suspend this service. In addition to this, all of our commissioned short break providers also decided to suspend their services, this included both overnight and day-time based support, as well as support that is part of our statutory 'short break local offer'.
- 6.14 This has had a significant impact on our disabled children, both those that are cared for and children in need, and has resulted in very little support being provided either inside or outside of family homes. Some of these children and young people have continued to access education via their special school but the wider package of support usually available to these families has not been available. The vast majority of our commissioned providers have

offered virtual support and some practical support through social media, food parcels, games and activities.

- 6.15 The Children with Disabilities Social Work Team and Short Breaks Team have been working with children, young people, parents and carers to identify creative ways that current packages of support could be altered to ensure that families have continued to receive some level of support, for example allowing parents and carers to use their direct payment or early help individual payment to purchase sensory equipment, accessing online dancing and music lessons. Many personal assistants who are paid via direct payments have continued to have contact with children and families through social media platforms, for example Zoom and Facetime.
- 6.16 Ordinarily, the packages of support that we deliver are calculated on an annual basis, for example 3 hours per week direct payment during term time (38 weeks) and 6 hours per week during the school holidays (14 weeks). This better reflects the additional stress placed on many families of disabled children outside of the school term and provides some autonomy to families in purchasing more support at the right time. We have found with many families that despite the amazing resilience that they have shown we have had to increase the school holiday elements of some care packages to manage the increasing stress within the families home. This will result in an overspend within the direct payments budget over this financial year.
- 6.17 We are currently working with the wider council, our short break commissioned providers, the Parent Carer Forum, and other local organisations to reintroduce an increased short breaks offer over the summer period.
- 6.18 Care leavers potentially present as the most vulnerable cohort during this period due to the risk of social isolation, lack of employment, financial hardship and deterioration in mental health. The service is working hard to stay in touch and offer support as a priority for these young people. We have adapted our local offer in light of COVID-19 to ensure care leavers have the support they need.
- 6.19 To ensure Members are informed and can effectively exercise their corporate parenting responsibilities, a regular briefing has been established for the members of the Corporate Parenting Committee.
- 6.20 It was anticipated that the national restrictions would initially reduce the numbers of children and young people reported as missing. This

has been the case with a significant reduction in incidents since March. More recently, the numbers have gradually started to increase (May) and we might expect this to return to more usual levels as the restrictions continue to ease. Our offer to children continues through the commissioned service, providing independent support virtually, including return home interviews, some one to one case work and resources for professionals, children or parents and carers. Multi-agency trigger meetings have continued to take place for the most vulnerable children to ensure that there is a coordinated safety plan that enables risk reduction despite the current changes to working. There are clear pathways to considering potential risks for these children of child exploitation and the Operational Groups have continued to meet monthly.

- 6.21 There has been a national focus on the increased risks that the restrictive measures will have presented for victims of Domestic Abuse and their children. The media have suggested a significant increase in reporting and week commencing 8 June the NSPCC provided their evidence that children had also suffered as a result of having reduced access to safe adults and networks outside the home. In Cheshire East we have seen requests for support returning to normal expected levels after an initial reduction. The most recent pattern which is emerging is an increase in the seriousness of the harm being caused within families already known to services, with a greater number of referrals to the high risk provision of IDVAs and MARAC.
- 6.22 Throughout this period, Domestic Abuse Services have continued to work together across the partnership to provide safety, reduce risk and prevent further harm for the whole family. We have increased our response at the point of the first call to strengthen the intervention. Some face to face work is taking place, but for the majority, individual and joint family work is being delivered by video link, as is the group work. We have had positive feedback about this, including group work carried out with those who harm.
- 6.23 Alongside this we have been part of campaigning and raising awareness of the support available across the PAN Cheshire footprint and provided resources for parents and professionals which have been well received. This intensive community support work has prevented an escalation in the victims requiring emergency accommodation and we have been able to support all those requiring this form of help. In preparation for the experiences we know will only be heard once restrictions are fully lifted, we have been successful in

a number of applications for additional temporary funding from central government, supported by the PAN Cheshire Transformation Board. We will also use the experiences we have had during this period to introduce greater choice for how we respond to meet need in the future.

- 6.24 Now we are moving into recovery, all children open to Children's Social Care will receive a face to face visit in the next few weeks if they have not already received one during lockdown.
- 6.25 Some families have coped exceptionally well during this time. However, we know that lockdown has been a challenging time for some, and will have allowed issues to remain hidden, preventing early identification and prevention.
- 6.26 We expect to see a rise in referrals to Prevention and Children's Social Care once more children return to schools and settings. This could result in a significant increase in demand to services over the coming year.

Early Help and Prevention

- 6.27 A significant number of childcare settings in Cheshire East decided to close as a result of Coronavirus and the ability to furlough staff. We wrote to every setting advising them that we have interim legal authority to request them to re-open if needed. As a result, the number of settings open doubled. We have offered a brokerage service for any child that required a place in a setting so all children have been appropriately supported and can access provision. Regular calls are in place with early years settings to check their status and the vacancies that they offer sufficient places are available for keyworkers and vulnerable children. Concerted effort continues to be made to support vulnerable under 5's who are open to Children's Social Care back into settings in order to support families and reduce family pressures.
- 6.28 All early years settings were encouraged to be in regular contact with families whether they were open or closed, to ensure that families were aware support was available if they wanted advice, or if they wanted to access childcare in the future.
- 6.29 The DfE guidance for settings has been complex and we have established a helpline to support settings and childminders with their queries, which has been well received. We are working closely with

settings and childminders to plan for reopening and have established focus groups to drive this work forward.

- 6.30 We continue to support families open to our services and we are now the top performing local authority in the North West for Family Focus (Troubled Families Programme), achieving successful outcomes for 1,900 families.
- 6.31 Cases open to the Cheshire East Family Service are increasingly becoming more complex. Lockdown has had an impact on the mental health of our children, young people and parents/ carers so our intervention and existing plans and priorities within them are changing as a result.
- 6.32 The Youth Support Service is carrying out joint work with PCSOs in local communities targetting hot spots where young people are gathering. This has been positively received by young people and parents.

Education and Skills

- 6.33 We have worked closely with schools throughout this period, and have supported schools through school closure. Overall, Cheshire East schools have been very responsive and flexible to changing the way they work to accommodate vulnerable children and children of keyworkers. All but six of our schools were open over Easter compared to just 60% nationally.
- 6.34 We have established a range of support for schools, intially providing daily calls to offer support and check on their wellbeing, which has now reduced to twice a week. This has ensured we have strong communication and concerns are shared and resolved together, and schools have reported that they feel supported and listened to. We have developed specific guidance for schools on safeguarding, testing and HR matters, and send out daily bulletins to schools sharing the latest advice and guidance. We have provided PPE to schools where needed. We are continuing to provide intensive support to schools to those that need it. We have established attendance monitoring arrangements to enable oversight of pupils numbers and the number of vulnerable children attending, including schools liaising with Children's Social Care if children are not attending, and if they are unable to make contact with them, so that this can be pursued by other services.

- 6.35 We have ensured free school meals are provided both to pupils who are continuing to attend, and for those who are not in school. We have cancelled the majority of school transport, but ensured that transport arrangements have remained in place for those who are continuing to attend, including where vulnerable children have been increasingly supported back into school.
- 6.36 The Virtual School for cared for children has provided additional guidance and resources to carers and children to ensure they can continue to make progress educationally while they are not in school. We have also been coordinating work around the DfE offer to supply equipment and 4G to support remote education for Year 10 and vulnerable pupils.
- 6.37 We have received risk assessments from schools for children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) who are not in school. We have regular contact with the Parent Carer Forum and have provided learning resources tailored to different types of needs to support children, along with a helpline for parents with children with Autism and support via video conferencing for children with sensory impairments. Health partners have also looked at different ways of meeting children's needs from home. Support and equipment has been provided for families where needed to enable them to support remote education. We know that many parents and children with an EHCP are finding it challenging and are struggling with the fact that routines and provision at school will have changed. We anticipate that this will continue and additional support will be needed as we re-integrate back into school over the coming year.
- 6.38 We are continuing to improve the quality of our EHCPs. As a result of the change to SEND (Special Educational Needs and/or Disabilities) legislation due to coronavirus, we are now required to evidence for each child with an EHCP what reasonable endeavours we have made ensure children receive the provision detailed in their plan during COVID-19. There are currently 2,600 children on plans, and evidence needs to be gained from Health, Education and Social Care, so this is a considerable exercise. A working group has established a clear process for completing these returns and work is currently underway on completing these for all our children.
- 6.39 We have developed a minimum offer to support transition remotely for children and young people who are due to move schools.

- 6.40 We effectively managed our primary offer date remotely in line with temporary legislation, with 98.1% of Cheshire East residents offered a preference school and 91.4% offered their first choice. The school admissions team received more than 4,200 applications for places.
- 6.41 School building works have been significantly delayed due to coronavirus. We have put alternative arrangements in place, including temporary accommodation, to ensure we can still offer places to pupils in September, avoiding disruption to children and expensive out of borough placements.
- 6.42 We have been very busy holding extensive discussions with all key stakeholders; teaching unions, school heads and the Cheshire East parent carer forum, on a programme of a phased wider opening of education settings following the announcement of the Prime Minister on 10 May. An Education Recovery group has been established to plan for the phased wider opening of schools. We agreed a Cheshire East position which we have communicated to all parents and schools. Plans included a two-week period from 1 June to allow staff to prepare classrooms and implement the significant changes that need to be made to ensure safe working practices with smaller numbers of children and young people.
- 6.43 We reviewed this position in light of the information released on Friday 5 June that indicated that the R-value had increased marginally above 1 in the North West. A joint statement from the Cheshire and Merseyside Directors of Public Health on the phased re-opening of schools was issued. They considered the phased returning of schools carefully, reviewing the latest available evidence and good practice, and supported progressing plans for a phased return of Reception, Years 1 and 6 if it is deemed safe to do so. We therefore confirmed that our position would be to continue using the cautious but sensible approach outlined in our previous letter subject to risk assessments being in place.
- 6.44 From 15 June, all eligible nursery-aged pupils will be able to attend on a limited and controlled basis where staffing capacity and space allows. From 22 June, all Reception and Year 1 pupils will be welcome back to Primary School, moving to all Year 6 on 29 June if the school has enough space to do so with social distancing in place.
- 6.45 From 15 June, secondary schools will offer some face to face support for Year 10 and Year 12* pupils (*Year 11 for alternative provision) in line with the government guidance, with no more than

25% of these pupils attending at any one time. We have asked that schools consider creating targeted provision for 'bubbles' of pupils who are vulnerable to underperformance or disengagement to help to support them in their education.

- 6.46 Pupils of special schools will be encouraged to return to school based on a review of their individual risk assessment. Priority will be given to increasing places to children of key workers and children who have a social worker. Special schools will consider a phased approach to support a wider opening to children and young people, which enables small groups to adjust to changes where this is appropriate, from 15 June. Special schools will steadily increase pupil numbers, prioritising key transition groups.
- 6.47 For pupils not in school, we asked schools to ensure that children who are due to transition between schools in September are supported while they remain at home.
- 6.48 We also asked schools to review their home learning arrangements and support for wellbeing of children and young people, ensuring they have regular contact with all children not invited back into school to encourage and support learning and wellbeing.
- 6.49 Our priority is to make sure that any way forward is safe for everyone within our schools and we have delivered a supply of PPE to all schools and colleges prior to them opening. We have developed a risk assessment framework and checklist for schools to complete to ensure safe arrangements are in place, and we are releasing further advice and guidance around HR and safeguarding.
- 6.50 We are currently planning for the reopening of school kitchens, and establishing increased school transport for the phased reopening.
- 6.51 The Secretary of State for Education has announced that all pupils will return to school from September. We are awaiting guidance from the DfE on their plans to enable this to happen in a safe way.
- 6.52 We are having regular calls with the ADCS, Practice Leaders Group, DfE and Chief Social Worker to share good practice and any issues across LA areas and based on this we are satisfied that the measures we have put in place are the right ones to ensure children are protected. A number of our initiatives have been recognised as good practice, including our position on reopening schools and our letter to early years settings.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

- 6.53 We are seeing an impact of COVID-19, and families being confined together for long periods of time during lockdown, on the mental health of children, young people and parents/ carers. COVID-19 has also brought additional stressors, such as employment uncertainty, lack of emotional and parenting support from family and friends through restricted contact, change in working conditions and expectations, and additional financial pressures from having children at home. This is taking a toll on some of our families. An all age mental health telephone number was put in place at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic as a single point of contact. CAMHS have worked closely with Children's Services and the wider partnership to raise awareness of the help available and how to get in touch. Over the last few weeks there has been an initial decrease in the number of referrals to CAMHS. This is expected to raise in future months.
- 6.54 A range of resources have been shared with staff to support them to work with families who are experiencing mental health difficulties. We continue to seek out additional training for our workforce to ensure that they are equipped to deal with the increased demand from children and parents whose Mental Health has deteriorated during lockdown.
- 6.56 Following the Government's announcement on 7 June about additional mental health support for pupils and teachers, the DfE has published a new training module to support teachers in giving lessons on the government's new Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) curriculum, which will make mental health and wellbeing a compulsory part of pupils' education in primary and secondary school.
- 6.57 Developed with clinical experts, the training module will help subject leads and teachers deliver the new curriculum effectively when it becomes compulsory from September, as well as improving their confidence in talking and teaching about mental wellbeing in class, especially as many measures to stop the spread of coronavirus remain in place and many people continue to experience restrictions in their daily lives.
- 6.58 New online resources designed by health and education experts will also be provided to schools and colleges to boost mental health support for staff and pupils, encouraging them to talk more

confidently about the anxieties and concerns they feel as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Videos, webinars and teaching materials, produced in partnership with charities, will be made available to schools and colleges, helping to foster conversations about mental health and reassure many young people who are worried about the impact of the virus on their lives.

- 6.59 As more pupils return to the classroom as part of the Government's phased approach to the wider opening of schools, the Department for Education has announced grants worth more than £750,000 for the Diana Award, the Anti-Bullying Alliance and the Anne Frank Trust - to help hundreds of schools and colleges build relationships between pupils, boost their resilience, and continue to tackle bullying both in person and online.

Impact and Challenges Ahead

- 6.60 We have many challenges ahead. COVID-19 is and will continue to have a significant impact on our children, young people and families. The strain of COVID-19 and lockdown has increased pressures for families, with some facing redundancy. The mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and families has been affected. Children and young people have missed out on education. Lockdown has reduced the visibility of children, allowing harm to remain hidden. The likely economic recession that will follow as a result of COVID-19 will increase the number of children living in poverty and will exacerbate the current inequalities. The legacy of this will be an increased demand for services over the next year but also in the longer term, at increased cost to the Council and the partnership.

7. Implications of the Recommendations

7.1. Legal Implications

- 7.1.1 New legislation has been enacted and guidance has been released in relation to coronavirus.
- 7.1.2 Some legislation, for example the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020, allows us to relax some of our statutory requirements in order to support and manage the provision of services to children and families during this time. The Children and Families Leadership Team have agreed that we will provide services to the higher original statutory requirements and will

only apply the relaxations where it is in children's best interests to do so, with a clearly recorded rationale.

7.1.3 Other new legislation, such as the changes to SEND legislation, has brought new requirements for services, such as the requirement to outline what reasonable adjustments have been made during this time to provide the provision in children's Education Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). Work is currently underway to ensure we are compliant with these requirements.

7.1.4 We have liaised with our Legal Services colleagues throughout the last few months, to assist with and support our understanding and implementation of all legislation and guidance that affects our services to children and families. We will continue to do so, as appropriate, as we move into the recovery phase.

7.2. Financial Implications

7.2.1 Like many councils, Cheshire East continues to face increased costs and demand pressures at the same time as seeing a significant drop in income. We estimate that the financial implications of COVID-19 for the whole Council are significant, at around £60m. To date, the Council has received £19.7m of un-ring-fenced grant from central government and additional grants for specific responsibilities.

7.2.2 As some children and young people will be staying in placements longer than they would otherwise, this will be a continued upward pressure on cared for children expenditure. We have seen an increase in the use of external foster care placements. It is likely that there will be increased demand for placements, and there is a risk that providers will uplift placement costs in response. Foster carer allowances have been temporarily increased to support the additional costs of having children at home as a result of coronavirus, and we have increased the support available to foster carers through regular phone contact, which carers have appreciated. As time progresses, it is likely that the increase in costs as a result of COVID-19 will rise further.

7.2.3 We expect to see a rise in referrals to Prevention and Children's Social Care once more children return to schools and settings. This could result in a significant increase in demand to services over the coming year and in the longer term.

7.3. Equality Implications

- 7.3.1 Care leavers are especially vulnerable and may be disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of housing and employment options as a result of COVID-19. They are also more likely to be living alone so have been at risk of being socially isolated during lockdown.
- 7.3.2 We have seen an increase in mental health issues, particularly for parents, as a result of the stress of lockdown. Many issues may still be remaining hidden and may only come to light as lockdown continues to lift.
- 7.3.3 Some people we work with are at higher risk from COVID-19, for example pregnant women, people from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds, and those with underlying health conditions such as some of our children with special educational needs and disabilities. Some of our children are being shielded, and could potentially be at risk of becoming socially isolated as their peers increasingly return back to school.
- 7.3.4 Some children with additional needs, for example those with autism, could find the change in routine at school and at home particularly challenging and may need additional support to help them through the changes.

7.4. Human Resources Implications

- 7.4.1 There have been HR implications to staff working in different ways. HR and Public Health have been supportive of officers in ensuring that robust risk assessments are in place and available to staff in undertaking their duties, for example in carrying out face to face visits to families.
- 7.4.2 We quickly moved to allow all staff who could work from home to do so, and services quickly adapted so that they could continue to operate effectively under the new circumstances. Changing to an organisation that predominantly works remotely has been a huge challenge but is working well and there have been many success stories. Staff have shown enormous flexibility and resilience. They have done a great job. Families have been very positive about our new offer and virtual contact with them, and there will some ways of working we will continue with in the long term.

7.4.5 There has been regular communication with staff, including regular Children and Families staff newsletters sharing good practice and the latest guidance, and good co-operation with the Trade Unions. We have had a strong emphasis on recognising and celebrating the hard work and achievements of our teams.

7.4.6 Fortunately, throughout this time our teams have remained well staffed and we have not seen the impact of COVID-19 on staffing levels.

7.5. Risk Management Implications

7.5.1 We have developed specific COVID-19 risk registers for Children's Services. We have also looked at Worse Case Scenarios as part of the whole Council response. We are keeping Business Continuity Plans under review. The Children and Families Leadership team are continuing to meet on a regular basis to share information and ensure there is a joint approach to our response and risks are anticipated and mitigated.

7.6. Rural Communities Implications

7.6.1 There are no direct rural communities' implications of this report.

7.7. Implications for Children & Young People/Cared for Children

7.7.1 The contents of this report have outlined the implications for our children and young people.

7.8. Public Health Implications

7.8.1 COVID-19 is a global pandemic and public health emergency. Public Health advice has been sought to ensure Children's Services are complying with Public Health guidelines and are providing safe services for families and our staff.

7.9. Climate Change Implications

7.9.1 The increase in people working from home, and reduced travel, has had a positive impact on climate change. The current government guidance is to avoid public transport, so we are encouraging families to walk or cycle to school where possible.

8. Ward Members Affected

8.1 All members.

9. Consultation & Engagement

9.1. Our Youth Council has continued to meet (virtually), and we continue to consult with the Parent Carer Forum and other groups. Feedback from families and partners on our support during COVID-19 has overall been very positive. Frontline staff have been involved in planning for recovery.

10. Access to Information

10.1. None.

11. Contact Information

11.1. Any questions relating to this report should be directed to the following officer:

Name: Mark Palethorpe
Job Title: Executive Director of People
Email: Mark.Palethorpe@cheshireeast.gov.uk