

Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Date of Meeting: 23 November 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 impact of the pandemic on children and young people.

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. Children's Services' Response to COVID-19

Children's Social Care

- 5.1 We are now seeing the rise in contacts and referrals to Children's Social Care that we predicted as a result of Covid-19. This is resulting in social workers' caseloads being higher than we would want them to be, although we do have a clear plan in place to reduce this. We have asked the safeguarding partnership to support with this by partner agencies leading cases that are able to step down to prevention and early help, to prevent families experiencing statutory intervention for longer than they need to. We are working closely with the partnership to ensure that key services are maintained should stricter restrictions be implemented, to ensure that children, young people and their parents/ carers can still access the support they need, and to avoid the increase in need we have seen as a result of the initial lockdown. We will be continuing to conduct face to face visits to family homes to ensure we are effectively safeguarding children and young people.
- 5.2 We expect to receive an inspection of local authority Children's Services (ILACS) very soon and are preparing for this new type of

inspection, which will focus on the quality and impact of decision making for children and young people during the pandemic.

- 5.3 We launched our new fostering brand on 1 October – Together for Fostering. Less than two weeks since the launch, we had already received 12 enquiries which is very positive. A direct maildrop will be carried out to all households in Cheshire East – residents will receive a postcard on fostering and what to do if you want to become a foster carer. 12 potential carers are currently in assessment. New foster carers will enable us to meet more children and young people's needs closer to home, so they can stay connected with the people who are important to them and their communities. We would like everyone to promote our campaign and spread the word to the people they know who would make great carers for our children and young people.
- 5.4 We are really proud to share that My CWA, a partnership formed with Cheshire East Council which tackles domestic abuse in our borough, have won a national award for their fantastic work from the centre of social justice.

Early Help and Prevention

- 5.5 As reported previously we are continuing to see the needs of families increasing, alongside an increase in referrals. We are bringing in additional capacity to support the Family Service to meet this increase in demand on a temporary basis to ensure children and young people are safe, and where possible prevent families from needing to escalate into a statutory social care service. We are continuing to monitor this closely as we move forward with increased evidence of poor mental health, neglect and pressurised households emerging in terms of needs.
- 5.6 We have now achieved 99% of our early years settings opening after the initial lockdown period and 96% of Childminders open for business. However, there have been positive Covid cases within our early years settings (mainly relating to staff), and for some this has meant they have needed to close for the two week isolation period. A dedicated email support line and follow up calls are in place providing specific Public Health advice to effected settings which is working well.
- 5.7 We have provided e-vouchers for children and young people who are eligible for free school meals over half term where needed to ensure we have supported our most vulnerable.

- 5.8 We continue to be concerned about the opportunities for our young people as they move into adulthood. We ran a Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) summit at the end of September where training providers, colleges and young people who are NEET informed the development of our NEET offer going forward. Alongside a range of other actions, we agreed that services and providers will meet regularly to problem solve issues for complex cases and individual young people, which will support effective sharing of options available to move into training and employment – including kick start opportunities. We will also be working together with the Job Centre to hold a virtual job fair for NEET young people in January.

Education and Skills

- 5.9 Over 53,319 pupils (88%) are now attending our schools (as at 15 October). Our attendance has remained high and is above national, statistical neighbours, and the North West average, which demonstrates that the preparations we have made have been effective in gaining parental confidence. This is despite an increasing number of pupils isolating due to positive Covid test results in schools. We currently have 3,392 pupils not attending schools as they are isolating either due to Covid symptoms, testing positive for Covid or having been in close contact with a person who has tested positive. Attendance of pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan and pupils with a social worker also remains good at 87% and 88% respectively.
- 5.10 We have seen an increase in parents expressing an interest in electively home educating their child which we expected and is being seen nationally. We have received 111 applications, which is high compared with previous years, but currently only 16 parents have deregistered following meetings with the school and local authority to understand what is expected if they home educate. This is compared with 18 applications last year when all 18 deregistered. A clear process is in place to ensure parents and carers are supported and the decision to electively home educate is in the best interest of the child or young person.
- 5.11 We are continuing to provide intensive support to schools around how to implement the DfE guidance to ensure we have a consistent and safe approach across all schools, including around the new changes as a result of the tier system.

- 5.12 We have worked with Public Health to produce guidance to support schools when children or staff develop Covid-19 symptoms, including additional guidance on school bubbles to keep the number of pupils required to isolate to a minimum. We have created a dedicated Education Covid Response Team which came into effect at the end of September. This Team runs a helpline from 8am to 8pm on weekdays and during the weekend and responds to reports from schools on positive cases, and offers advice and guidance on the appropriate measures and pupil isolation. This is ensuring we are both supporting schools and have a consistent approach across Cheshire East. The helpline has received very positive feedback from schools. Workers within other services, such as Children's Social Care, the Family Service, and Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, are being notified when pupils are isolating so they are aware and can support families.
- 5.13 Since the beginning of September the Education Covid Response team has supported 111 settings with positive cases in 72 settings.
- 5.14 We are providing daily reports on cases to the DfE. As at 13 October, there were 44 settings with positive cases, affecting 3,392 pupils and 142 staff. We are tracking the Covid cases in schools. To date, transmissions have not been linked to schools and are linked to home or social mixing outside of school.
- 5.15 To increase safety for pupils, drivers and staff, we have now made wearing a face covering compulsory for all pupils aged 11 and over, and drivers, on school transport. We are also encouraging schools to ask parents and carers to wear face coverings when dropping off or collecting pupils from school to help to reduce transmission where there are larger numbers of people gathering. As we have moved into a High Local Covid Alert Level, DfE guidance has been updated for high schools that adults and pupils should wear face coverings when moving around the premises, outside of classrooms, such as in corridors and communal areas where social distancing cannot easily be maintained.
- 5.16 The Department of Health and Social Care will be providing free PPE for education settings up to March 2021. We have organised the distribution of this to schools.
- 5.17 From 22 October, schools must provide immediate access to remote learning to any pupils who can't attend school due to Covid-19. This includes where a class, group or a small number of pupils need to

self-isolate, or local restrictions require pupils to remain at home. The DfE has put funding in place to support schools to access and set up a digital online platform through Microsoft or Google. These platforms can help to connect teachers and pupils when access to face-to-face education is disrupted. We have circulated a summary of all learning and training opportunities on remote learning to schools.

- 5.18 Ed Tech have been commissioned by the DfE to support schools in use of technology. We have arranged briefings for our schools delivered by Ed Tech which took place on the week of 19 October. We have been offered to be part of a first wave of schools in receiving a wide range of support to use google or Microsoft platforms to assist in remote learning which we are currently working with schools to establish.
- 5.19 We have 22 schools who are eligible to access academic mentors to support vulnerable children. We organised training for these schools week commencing 12 October. The schools have now registered and will be allocated mentors through Teach First. Teach First deliver this programme on behalf of the DfE. In addition, we are about to launch a programme to support 40 schools focused of supporting disadvantaged pupils.
- 5.20 A meeting has been held to map the support needed for Gypsy Roma Traveller pupils to ensure good attendance at school.
- 5.21 On 12 October, the Secretary of State for Education announced that the summer exam series will be delayed by three weeks, giving students more time to prepare for their exams. Exams will begin on 7 June and end on 2 July for almost all A and AS Levels and GCSE's. Further details are expected to be published later in autumn.
- 5.22 Ofsted commenced visits to schools (not inspections) from 28 September. The visits will usually last for one day. Ofsted are planning to visit 5% of schools this term. We organised two sessions for schools ran by Ofsted in September to explain the arrangements and scope for these visits, which over 90 schools attended. A number of schools in Cheshire East how now received a visit and have shared their experience with our other settings.
- 5.23 We are launching our Wellbeing in Education Programme which will start in November. Each school will receive two training sessions which aim to empower key staff with knowledge, understanding and clear strategies, so that they can use these to influence school/college

policy, procedures and responses in regard to supporting and enhancing wellbeing and resilience for all. This is a national training programme which we have tailored to meet our local needs.

- 5.24 We have sent a thank you letter before half term from the Leader of the Council, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children and Families as a public thank you to leaders, teachers, college and school staff for all that they are doing to keep our children and young people safe and to ensure their education continues during the current crisis.

6. Implications of the Recommendations

6.1. Legal Implications

- 6.1.1 New legislation has been enacted and guidance has been released in relation to coronavirus.
- 6.1.2 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.

6.2. Financial Implications

- 6.2.1 We are now seeing the expected rise in demand to Children's Services as a result of Covid-19 which will increase costs to the Council.

6.3. Equality Implications

- 6.3.1 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 increased restrictions.
- 6.3.2 We have seen an increase in mental health issues, both for children and young people and parents and carers.
- 6.3.3 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.

- 6.3.4 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.

6.4. Human Resources Implications

- 6.4.1 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.
- 6.4.2 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.
- 6.4.3 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.
- 6.4.4 We are now seeing an increase in staff becoming infected or needing to self-isolate as a result of Covid-19.
- 6.4.5 We are conscious of the sustained emergency response that has been required by our staff, and the impact this has, and we are continuing to remind staff that they need to prioritise their wellbeing in order to maintain their resilience.

6.5. Risk Management Implications

- 6.5.1 We have developed specific COVID-19 risk registers for Children's Services. 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.

6.6. Rural Communities Implications

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

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

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

6.8. Public Health Implications

6.8.1 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.

6.9. Climate Change Implications

6.9.1 The increase in people working from home, and reduced travel, has had a positive impact on climate change.

7. Ward Members Affected

7.1 All members.

8. Consultation & Engagement

8.1. 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.

9. Access to Information

9.1. None.

10. Contact Information

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

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