
To: Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)

15 October 2020

Subject: Children's Services Impact of COVID-19 pandemic – Vulnerability and Disadvantage

1 Purpose of the Note

- 1.1 To inform the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) of the current situation and impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Children's Services and partners.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 The Education and Children's Scrutiny Board (2) are recommended to:
- 1) To note the current situation, progress and impact of COVID-19 pandemic
 - 2) Identify any areas the Board may want to look at in more detail
 - 3) Identify any further recommendations for the appropriate Cabinet Member

3 Information/Background

- 3.1 Children's Services has continued to deliver protection, support and intervention to vulnerable families across Coventry, whilst maintaining critical services throughout the challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic. The critical elements of the service involved the immediate protection of children who were brought to the attention of Children's Services including: MASH; The Emergency Duty Team (EDT); Section 47 Child Protection (CP) enquiries; Section 17 support to Children in need (CiN); Children and Families Assessments; any other type of assessment of need.
- 3.2 The ongoing protection and support of children has also continued during this period and included: children who received an early help offer to prevent them requiring statutory intervention, Open CiN cases, open CP cases, open Looked After Children (LAC), open care leavers. Children's Services continued as far as possible to provide the same range of provision to children and families in Coventry, albeit scaled back and delivered in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 3.3 As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown, Children's Services scaled back: routine contract management and commissioning activity; face to face contact; large gatherings; face to face group work; certain statutory visits to children where these had been risk assessed and signed off by a manager and where IT systems were used as an alternative.
- 3.4 Children's Services depends on a system of partners across the city to enable the delivery of a safe and efficient service. Partners continued to work with the service throughout this period: Section 47 enquiries with the police; health as a safeguarding partner; foster carers; third party providers of looked after children placements; and schools.
- 3.5 Where services temporarily ceased, there was increased pressure on families/carers, wherever possible alternative support was offered. The vast majority of Children's Services continued to operate albeit in a different way.

- 3.6 Four Family Hubs and the area social work offices closed. This enabled staff to be supported to work from home and continue to ensure children were safeguarded. Four Hubs remained open which continued to provide an Early Help Offer to families and were open for a 'Here to Help' function so families could access face to face support at a time of crisis.
- 3.7 The consequence of a '*perfect storm*' has led to increased levels of risk within Children's Services. Fewer members of staff, parental stress, reduced availability, children seen less often, less reliance on partners and greater partial closures of schools have all contributed to operating with a greater level of risk in the system.

4 Impact of Covid-19 on Children's Services

- 4.1 The overall volume of statutory work reduced at the beginning of the pandemic, in April 2020 there were 25% fewer referrals than in April 2019. In normal circumstances this might be a positive indicator of confidence in the safeguarding system. However, as the reduction in referrals can be linked to the national lockdown and reduction in public services across the board including education, the voluntary sector and drug services, this is not the case. Access to children and families was greatly reduced during this period.
- 4.2 April 2020 highlighted a marked drop in referrals. Children's Services received 1582 contacts of which 279 were accepted as referrals (compared with April 2019, 2110 contacts and 448 referrals were received). Schools are consistently the highest referring agency. During March 2020, school referrals reduced following school closures. Covid-19 school closures and the reduction in other services contributed to increased levels of hidden harm within the system.
- 4.3 Domestic abuse is one of Coventry's highest reasons for referral. The reduction in overall MASH referrals was therefore a concern because it indicated hidden need and potential risk, particularly as other support services within the community supporting domestic abuse ceased or reduced, for example, the Domestic Abuse Perpetrator Programs, or Domestic Abuse Victim Support groups.
- 4.4 Agencies have continued to work together within the Covid-19 constraints. Schools across the city identified children that they deemed to be vulnerable and put monitoring systems in place, proportional to the risk. Strategies included daily 'phone calls, door-step visits and escalation to the police and Children's Services for safe and well checks. However, 'lockdown' reduced visibility of vulnerable children and therefore increased inherent risk.
- 4.5 Where the risks to children required escalation to court proceedings court slots were reduced and courts worked virtually. Solicitors had limited availability to support parents and there was an increase in adjournments. Consequently, the risk of a child returning to the home of their abusive parent increased.
- 4.6 Children's Services' practitioners continued to undertake face to face home visits where families were assessed as high risk or to prevent a situation from escalating. Early help support was generally delivered virtually by phone or video call with the Family Hubs that were open offering a Here to Help function.
- 4.7 The service continued to work hard to safeguard the children open to Children's Services, but the amount of hidden harm significantly increased.
- 4.8 Where children needed to be removed from home, there was a shortage of placements, locally, regionally and nationally. This became more acute and impacted on the costs of placements. This had a significant impact on securing safe provision for children to move to.
- 4.9 Overall, services were concerned that the increased pressure on the system would result in an increased risk that some children and young people would not be safeguarded because they fell through an unavoidable gap during this Covid-19 pandemic. Services have continued to remain committed to ensure children and families in Coventry are safeguarded as far as is possible.

5 Coventry Safeguarding Children’s Partnership response to COVID-19

- 5.1 The Chair of the Coventry Safeguarding Children Partnership and Coventry Safeguarding Adults Board confirmed that safeguarding of children and adults in Coventry remained a priority, as services worked through the changes brought about by coronavirus. Working practices continued to evolve to meet the needs of the most vulnerable in our communities.
- 5.2 The Board reassessed planned activity and adopted a pragmatic approach, to what was feasible as services adapted to new working arrangements. The Board reinforced that Coventry’s commitment to provide help and support where needed, is as strong as ever and that working together has never been more important.
- 5.3 The Local Safeguarding Children Partnership (LSCP) team was tasked by its executive members to produce a position statement outlining the state of play across the Children’s Partnership.

6 Impact of COVID-19 on the Workforce

- 6.1 The Council have experienced a significant number of staff self-isolating because of Covid-19. Initially, the number of staff infected increased, leading to significant capacity issues that impacted on the Council’s ability to effectively respond to all safeguarding issues. Good agency staff were in short supply and did not compensate for service pressures, the negative impact on frontline staff therefore increased.
- 6.2 Children’s Services continued to ensure that the recruitment of social workers remained a key priority, this included being part of the DfE initiative focused on the returning to practice recruitment campaign *Social Work Together*. The campaign launched by Social Work England and LGA aimed to bring social workers who have retired in the last two years back into practice to support the local response to coronavirus Covid-19.
- 6.3 The service continues to have a robust recruitment process that specifically targets recruiting experienced children and family’s social workers via a range of social media platforms, recruitment campaigns and other innovative approaches. Recruitment interviews have continued during this period virtually via Microsoft Teams. However, with demand increasing, and a high level of social worker vacancies and agency costs increasing, the service are under significant pressure.

7 Impact of COVID-19 - Performance

- 7.1 The table below provides a comparison of current performance compared with December 2019, prior to COVID-19 and the impact since April 2020 to the current date. The table highlights significant increases for children on a Child Protection Plan, Looked After Children and Child in need. The reliance on agency staffing is increasing.

7.2 Comparison of Performance December 2019 – August 2020

	December 2019	April 2020	May 2020	June 2020	July 2020	August 2020
Child Protection Plans	341	408	414	410	419	425
Looked After Children	691	696	701	707	725	740
Child in Need	1,684	1,225	1,278	1,508	1,668	1733
Child and Family assessments	372	516	253	296	354	407
Contacts received	1,778	1,582	1,762	2,091	2,127	1,698
Agency Staff	30	36	44	48	53	56

7.2 Overall performance is highlighting an increase in activity across Children's Services, the increase in demand is beginning to put significant pressure on services. There has been a 11% increase in Child in Need (CIN) cases, 6.3% increase in Child Protection (CP) and 5.6% increase in Looked After Children (LAC) since March 2020 to the current date.

- Increase in Referrals in the last six months (**504** compared with 279 in April 2020)
- Contacts have remained over 2000 a month – in August this has reduced to 1698 as the schools were closed.
- Number of children subject to a child protection plan have increased to **425** compared with 400 in March 2020
- S47's has increased, highest since October 2019.
- Children in Need continue to rise **1733** compared with 1225 in February 2020
- Looked after children have seen a significant increase to **740** compared with 690 in February.
- Assessments completed within 45 days increased to **95.1%** compared to 85.1 % in March 2020

8 Reset and Recovery

8.1 Children's Services have experienced a number of challenges as well as a number of positives and advantages to working in a different way, which will influence how the service work differently in the future. A summary of some of the challenges and positives are highlighted below:

8.2 Challenges

- Challenging to carry out assessments or effective monitoring virtually (difficult to know if seeing a true picture)
- Difficult to build rapport virtually, challenging to communicate virtually particularly with young children or those with disabilities
- Managing and supporting staff more difficult remotely in terms of providing support e.g. to new staff members, or emotional support and monitoring performance
- Greater risk of 'hidden harm' not being identified (reduced referrals from partners and school closures)
- Impact on capacity either due to sickness/absence or due to reactive tasks
- When schools reopen and harm becomes 'unhidden' likely to lead to increased demand
- Negative impacts on some e.g. families where hubs have closed and lack of progress in areas such as adoption cases within court arena
- Additional burdens on foster carers and increased risk (vulnerable age group)
- Reduced opportunity for victims of DV or children who are victims of abuse to engage with professionals alone

8.3 Positives and Advantages

- Reduced travel time and expenses
- Some meetings more focused, and better attended use of teams for panel for example very effective
- Increase in collaboration/teamwork and shared goals and cross service working
- Building closer relationships with other colleagues/partners
- Training accessed virtually has been positive
- More flexible work life balance for some
- Use of MS Teams particularly effective instead of long emails and for small meetings
- Chat function of MS Teams is very effective
- Development of staff's digital skills

- Some young people have liked virtual contact.
- 8.4 Working in a different way has created a number of opportunities that will be explored further by Children's Services such as: more flexible working; further virtual /learning options; consideration of mix of face to face and virtual contacts; working differently with partners, which builds on the momentum of the One Coventry approach.

9 Lessons learnt during COVID-19

- 9.1 During this unprecedented time, lessons continue to be learnt. Children's Service continue to embrace the changes and share with staff to further improve services and outcomes for children and families.
- Teams are vital for the wellbeing of staff. Whilst working from home is possible it is not a permanent option. Children's Services staff need the support from teams to debrief and feel supported
 - The importance of ad hoc conversations and support. This has been a lesson; staff need support at different times and in different ways which are best met in a building/team
 - Training can be as effective as a bite size webinar and more staff can access this.
 - Communication is key, at every level it is key to update at every stage to ensure everyone is included and supported
 - Technology could not replace physical visits to children but could provide an opportunity to speak to young people more frequently as added value without increasing the number of physical visits
 - Mainstreaming video interviews into the recruitment strategy which could possibly make recruitment much more efficient. There are huge benefits in terms of keeping touch with newly recruited candidates.
 - Coventry Children's Services participated in a rapid research project facilitated through London Kings University on the impact of the pandemic on Children's Services. The learning and insight from this research were beneficial for supporting staff and understanding on what was happening at a local, regional and national level.

10 Children's Services Current position

- 10.1 Children's Services has maintained core service delivery; delivering ongoing protection, support and intervention to vulnerable families across Coventry during the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 10.2 All service now operating as business as usual and all buildings have re-opened. All Family Hubs and Area Teams are COVID-19 compliant and have risk assessments in place for each building with protective measures to mitigate COVID-19 risks and are regularly updated and shared with trade union colleagues and staff.
- 10.3 Broadgate House has continued to operate with reduced numbers of staff working via a rota system of staff who need to be in the office. Child Protection Conferences and LAC reviews are reviewing how face to face conferences via a hybrid model can work in the future.
- 10.4 Children's Homes have continued to operate and have all been inspected to ensure COVID-19 compliance. Broad Park House has re-opened the overnight facility for short breaks.
- 10.5 Virtual visits are ongoing throughout the service, with a return of face to face visits. The new way of working digitally is being incorporated into business as usual, with a number of learning and development events and webinars held on a regular basis.
- 10.6 Staff who can work effectively from home continue to do so.
- 10.7 Children's Services anticipated a spike in demand with Schools returning in September, however, the service have seen this earlier than expected with increased numbers of child

in need work, increased numbers of Child Protection work and LAC numbers increasing by 50. Hidden harm has led to increased complexity of the work coming in and complex risk.

11 Future Modelling

- 11.1 Children's Services have undertaken modelling work to understand the wider and longer-term impacts of lockdown.
- 11.2 Taking into account some of the national and regional work as well as emerging government guidance on lifting the lockdown, the Insight team, in partnership with children's services have developed a set of models that consider the potential demand into children's services over the next few months.

12 Overall Summary

- 12.1 The service is experiencing significant pressure with the increase in demand as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, it remains a very challenging operating environment. All services have re-opened, with services continuing to work virtually with some face to face visits being introduced.
- 12.2 The service continues to work hard to maximise the opportunities for innovation and creativity and work in different ways to provide services. This is becoming more difficult with the shortage of social workers and lack of quality agency staff.
- 12.3 The service is reaching a level of work that is becoming unmanageable, with caseloads increasing, a shortage of social workers, and high levels of vacancies have resulted in increased numbers of agency staff, with an agency market that is shrinking. The system is under extreme pressure. All of this is leading to a budget pressure.

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