



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

11 March 2021

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) and provide a progress update of the current situation and impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Children's Services and partners since October 2020.

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 on Children's Services and partners
 - 2) Identify any areas the Board may want to consider in more detail at a future meeting
 - 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 All buildings re-opened during the summer and have continued to remain open during the November lockdown and the current lockdown. All Family Hubs and Area Teams; Broadgate House; Children's Homes are COVID-19 compliant and have risk assessments in place for each building with protective measures to mitigate COVID-19 risks. These are regularly updated and shared with trade union colleagues and staff.
- 3.8 A service expectations document has been developed and shared with trade union colleagues to outline the minimum staffing expectations and service needs. The document was reviewed further in January 2021 to take account of the national lockdown position. Skeleton staffing arrangements are currently in place based on a rota and bubble teams formed to ensure the statutory functions are effectively carried out.
- 3.9 The consequence of a '*perfect storm*' has led to increased levels of risk across the children's partnership. 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 Contacts and referrals peaked in September /October 2020. In October 2020, the service received 2441 contacts of which of which 615 were accepted as referrals. This compares to 2080 contacts received in January 2021 of which 341 were accepted as referrals. The reduction in referrals is a result of current school closures and there is likely to be a further impact when schools re-open, which is predicted to be in early March 2021.
- 4.4 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.
- 4.5 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.

- 4.6 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.
- 4.7 During the current national lockdown all looked after children have been encouraged to attend school where possible. Coventry Virtual School has continued to offer support and guidance to the schools which were primarily responsible for the safeguarding of the looked after pupils which they had on their school roll during the 'lockdown' period.
- 4.8 Coventry Virtual School also constructed an 'at risk register' where each individual student's risk level was assessed; in collaboration with external agencies. Each level of risk was supported by an agreed level of contact and monitoring; with a personalised monitoring plan evolving for the most vulnerable students during the pandemic. This risk register was updated daily in order to ensure that students in need of further support and monitoring were clearly identified.
- 4.9 Following the suspension of the formal registration of pupils at their registered schools, the Virtual School established an interim measure to record the pupils' school attendance. This involved working with colleagues in fostering, social workers and a wide range of foster carers. A simple process was developed for colleagues to record if pupils were attending education provision during the suspension of usual education provision. A 'RAG' rating exercise was conducted based on the level of vulnerability of the young people which directed the frequency of contact with these young person's carers or school.
- 4.10 The management of the Virtual School have been an active participant with a wide range of regional and national conversations via webinars with their colleagues from Virtual Schools from across the country. This has meant that Coventry Virtual School are contributing in the national conversations for supporting some of the country's most vulnerable individuals.
- 4.11 Children's Services' practitioners have continued to undertake face to face home visits where families were assessed as high risk or to prevent a situation from escalating during the national lockdown position. Early help support is generally delivered virtually by phone or video call with the Family Hubs offering a Here to Help function only and staffed by bubble teams of 3 staff.
- 4.12 The service continued to work hard to safeguard the children open to Children's Services, but the amount of hidden harm significantly increased. This is a concern in the current national lockdown which will see hidden harm significantly increased further as Schools re-open once again in March 2021.
- 4.13 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.
- 4.14 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 confirmed that safeguarding of children 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 have continued to produce position statements outlining the position 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 The recruitment and retention of experienced frontline Children and Families Social Workers continues to be a challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a significant impact on recruitment and is making it difficult to recruit experienced social workers during this period. This has led to an increased use of agency staff and increased financial impact.
- 6.3 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. Coventry's Return to Practice (RTP) Programme relaunched in December 2020, six successful candidates have been offered a shadowing opportunity to update their practice in a specific team and ultimately be offered a permanent opportunity to practice as a Children's Social Worker in Coventry.
- 6.4 Children's Service has successfully appointed an additional cohort of 9 Newly Qualified Social Workers (Cohort 7) who commenced on 25th January 2021. The Social Work Academy will manage a staggered cohort of NQSW's with an additional team to reduce the number of vacancies.
- 6.5 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 overleaf 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 throughout the year, although current performance data in January 2021 is starting to see a decrease in numbers. However, the reliance on agency staffing continues to increase due to the high levels of social work vacancies.

Comparison of Performance December 2019 – January 2021

	December 2019	April 2020	June 2020	August 2020	October 2020	December 2020	January 2021
Child Protection Plans	341	408	410	412	457	449	441
Looked After Children	691	693	703	735	757	760	753
Child in Need	1,684	1,225	1,508	1,733	2,010	1,901	1,773
Child and Family assessments	372	516	296	414	475	510	454
Contacts received	1,778	1,582	2,127	1,805	2,441	2,468	2080
Agency Staff	30	36	48	56	57	60	66

7.2 The number of Open Early Help has stabilised after increasing month on month since March 2020 and is now back to the level before COVID-19 lockdown. The numbers have stayed very similar for the last three months.

7.3 Overall performance activity is highlighting a reduction in January 2021 compared to previous months:

- The number of referrals has been reducing month by month since a peak of **665** in September to **341** in January 2021. This is the lowest number since the original lockdown in April 2020.
- The number of contacts has reduced by 16%, from **2468** in December to **2080** in January 2021. Contacts have stayed very similar between October and December 2020.
- Number of children subject to a child protection plan has continued to increase during the year and peaked at **457** in October 2020, this has started to reduce in the last two months and is currently **441**, this is still higher than 408 in April 2020.
- Completed S47's, reduced by 37% from **206** in December 2020 to **130** in January 2021, which is the lowest number since 99 in May 2020.
- Children in Need has reduced month on month since a peak of **2010** in October 2020 to **1773** in January 2021.
- Looked after children has seen a reduction from **760** in December 2020 to **753** in January 2021, although this is still the third highest number in the last 12 months.
- Assessments completed within 45 days reduced by 11% from **510** in December 2020 to **454** in January 2021, which is the lowest number since August 2020 (414).

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.

- 8.2 **Challenges** continue to be seen with: undertaking assessments or effective monitoring virtually (difficult to know if seeing a true picture); there are some challenges in communicating virtually particularly with young children or those with disabilities; managing and supporting staff is 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; 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. Some staff are expressing concern about homeworking, describing it as now living at work. Arrangements are in place to support staff with access to offices as appropriate.
- 8.3 **Positives and Advantages** of working virtually has reduced travel time and expenses; some meetings have been more focused and better attended with the use of teams; training has continued to be accessed virtually and has received positive feedback; more flexible work life balance for some; has developed staff's digital skills and 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.

10 Children's Services Current position – February 2021

- 10.1 Children's Services has maintained core service delivery throughout the COVID-19 pandemic; delivering ongoing protection, support and intervention to vulnerable families across Coventry during the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.
- 10.2 All buildings (Area Teams, Family Hubs, Broadgate House) have remained open during the second lockdown in November 2020 and continue to remain open following the third lockdown in January 2021.
- 10.3 Area Teams and Family Hubs operate via bubble teams with only those on duty in the building to ensure staffing levels are kept to a minimum at all times.
- 10.4 Children's Homes have continued to operate within the operating risk assessment. Broad Park House has continued to remain open with short breaks both targeted and community operating within the parameters of the risk assessment.
- 10.5 Family time has continued face to face as much as possible within the confines of the risk assessments of the child and carer and supplemented by virtual visits.
- 10.6 Foster carers have been visited remotely unless a face to face visit has been required.
- 10.7 All out of city visits to looked after children have been virtual unless it is risk assessed that a face to face visit is required.

- 10.8 Help and Protection services have reverted to more virtual visits where it is safe to do so.
- 10.9 Staff who can work effectively from home continue to be based at home.
- 10.10 All looked after children have been encouraged to attend school where possible during the lockdown period.
- 10.11 Until the service moves to a Hybrid model all Child Protection Reviews are held virtually, LAC reviews continue to be held virtually.
- 10.12 The service continues to target the recruitment of experienced social workers to reduce the reliance on agency staff.
- 10.13 Children's Services anticipate a further spike in demand when Schools return in March, as anticipated last year when Schools returned in September 2020. Hidden harm has led to increased complexity of the work coming in and complex risk and will be a further concern as Schools return.

11 Overall Summary

- 11.1 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 buildings and services have remained open during the lockdown and continue to work virtually with some face to face visits where it is safe to do so.
- 11.2 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. A number of new initiatives are being explored to retain existing staff and encourage experienced social workers to Coventry.
- 11.3 The service has received additional temporary funding to recruit additional posts to manage increased caseloads and address the system under pressure during this difficult period.
- 11.4 Coventry is on a journey to good or better and is committed to achieving this. Working with and alongside Leeds Local Authority will enhance the pace of change and further improve outcomes for children in Coventry.

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