

TITLE	Children's Services Response to Covid-19
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 5 November 2020
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Children's Services - Carol Cammiss

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

To provide an overview and assurance that Children's Services delivery was sustained and maintained during Covid 19.

RECOMMENDATION

This document is for information and update.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

In response to Covid 19, Children's Services amended how its services were delivered. This was to ensure that both workers and children were safe, schools and settings were supported, risks mitigated and statutory duties achieved.

Our changes were informed by Government advice and Public Health guidance on social distancing and good hygiene and Department of Education Covid specific guidance and amendments to legislation. Through the year as the wider local and national context has changed our approach and practice has adapted as we learnt and adjusted how to best deliver our services in a pandemic.

As changes were made around social work practice we revised our 'Practice standards' and this has been an ongoing process, to ensure that the workforce is supported in approaching their work and we continue to adhere to the revised guidance issued by the Government and the Department of Education in relation to practice and statutory exemptions.

This report provides an overview of our educational support to schools and settings and a summary of the changes and adaptation undertaken within Children's Social Care. This is followed by a summary of audits that were undertaken in April and June 2020 looking at our social care practice in a Covid context.

Background

Children's Social Care

In the early stages of our response to Covid most workers moved to predominately working from home. This was supported by the roll out of equipment from our IT colleagues at the council. Children's Social Care maintained a small cohort of workers who were based at Shute End and Here4U on a rota basis this included, social workers, admin, managers and service managers.

It is important to note that there are some roles and services that we wanted to deliver, where it is not possible to work from home and this included the Bridges Resource Centre, which offers respite to children with disabilities and they continued to offer service this and sustained this throughout. This has required some adaption in practice and use of PPE and these changes have been supported by consultation with Public Health England. The staff at the contact centre also continued delivering contact for two very young babies and all other contact ceased. This has now increased and has reverted back to its pre Covid level of delivery, with adaptations in place to support safe delivery.

Following the lockdown in March 2020 and in line with government advice Children Centres were closed and work with families as part of the Targeted Early Help offer moved to virtual methods of delivery. Over July and August 2020, Building Risk Assessments were completed for each centre as part of the Accommodation Recovery Group. This has led to staff returning to two of the Children's Centres (Starlings and Red Kite). Other centres are also in the process of being opened to staff. The centres currently open to staff are now having their risk assessments reviewed to enable the service to start looking at delivering targeted one to one for families who work with both our early help workers and Health Visitors.

Following the national implementation of lockdown restrictions, Children's Social Care developed revised practice standards for visiting and meeting with children. These COVID-19 practice standards were informed by the DfE's *Guidance for Local Authorities on Children's Social Care*, which was designed to support local authorities in determining how best to support families and protect vulnerable children during the pandemic.

The Government guidance begins by providing 6 underlying principles that should guide local authorities when making decisions about their provision during the pandemic. It states that these decisions should be:

- child-centred - promoting children's best interests
- risk-based - prioritising support and resources for children at greatest risk
- family focussed - harnessing the strengths in families and their communities
- evidence informed - ensuring decisions are proportionate and justified
- collaborative - working in partnership with parents and other professionals
- transparent - providing clarity and maintaining professional curiosity about a child's wellbeing

In relation to visits the Guidance states that they '*.... need not always be by means of a face to face visit, but it should be sufficient to meet the intended purpose of the visit whether that is safeguarding or promotion of the child's welfare*'.

Visiting children and families is central to many aspects of our service delivery in Children's Social Care for example with Looked after children, Children with Disabilities, Child Protection, Children in Need, Early Help. Visiting is how assessments are undertaken and relationships are developed.

Whilst Virtual visits using mobile technology were introduced across our broad range of visit activities where required, most of the Child Protection visits remained face to face. For example, in June 2020, 97% of Child Protection Visits were undertaken face to face, and 75% across all visits (Child In need and Looked After).

We had regular meetings with Public Health England which included our social work team managers. This allowed us to review the latest and changing guidance and explore specific case challenges, ensuring that we were keeping both children and our staff safe, using PPE correctly and proportionality where required in line with the guidance and thus enabling us to continue seeing children face to face.

Whilst visiting children is an important aspect of safeguarding them, working with the family; our partner agencies and the child's network is also central, ensuring that any plan of protection is implemented and supporting the required changes. This included working closely with our schools to support children who had a social worker attend where possible during lockdown.

Other adaption to practice included the Fostering Panel moving to a Virtual meeting, for the recruitment of foster carers there was an increased focus on the use of social media through the WBC Facebook, the Fostering Facebook page and postings on Twitter. The team received invaluable and greatly appreciated input and support from WBC communications, Engagement & Marketing Team. The overriding message in response to Covid-19 was that we were still recruiting foster carers and welcomed enquiries. This resulted in a continuous flow of enquiries which receive a same day/next working day response with initial visits/meetings being completed as soon as possible thereafter. By way of example: 11 enquiries received in June 2020 which compares with 8 received in June 2019 and an average of 10 across several years.

Children's Social Care Audit work Undertaken

In March of this year we developed revised practice standards for visiting children during the COVID-19 pandemic. This document set out our proposed approach to conducting and risk assessing visits during the national lockdown restrictions. In acknowledgement of the significant changes that these standards brought about to our practitioners, we decided to undertake an audit to examine whether they were being adhered to effectively, and to explore whether our practice was meeting the principles and requirements of latest Government guidance for Children's Social Care at the time.

A bespoke audit tool was developed for the project, which sought to explore our approach to risk assessment, visiting, and ensuring child centered work during the course of the pandemic. 33 cases were looked at in total - including Children in Need, Looked After Children, Child Protection and Care Leaver cases - with the overall breakdown of the sample being designed to reflect the Service's actual total caseload. To strengthen our assessment, a parent/carer views and child's voice audit was also undertaken in parallel, to ensure that the experiences of children and families were captured clearly in our final report. As part of this work, 42 children were spoken to and had their views obtained, including 15 Children in Care.

Our analysis identified a variety of positive and welcome themes about our work during this difficult and unprecedented time, most notably that:

- The arrangements for social care visits and meetings were being clearly recorded in the majority of cases (76%)
- Multi-agency meetings were continuing to take place within statutory timescales in most cases (78%);
- The quality of direct work was considered to be good in most cases (82%);

- All Children in Care were being appropriately supported to continue to have meaningful contact with birth families
- Reasons for children not attending school were recorded clearly, with evidence of social workers actively promoting school attendance where this was possible.

Whilst acknowledging the significant pressures that staff were under, the report did however highlight some concerns. Notably, it was found that essential COVID-19 health information about families was not consistently being recorded on case files.

So that we could also address the broader practice themes that the report had brought out, our Service Manager for Safeguarding also produced an action plan in response to the key findings. In the main, this action plan centred on the creation of updated Practice Standards for practitioners to follow. This new document - which included a revised COVID-19 Visiting Risk Assessment form - clarified our expectations around some crucial areas of practice. For example, what should and should not constitute a virtual visit, how and when health information for a family should be updated, and how often contact with family and professional networks should be made while lockdown restrictions continued. The new standards were subsequently disseminated amongst staff and publicised accordingly, including via the Director for Children's Services regular staff-wide briefing.

Following the publication of the report, it was decided that a further audit of this kind would be scheduled for later in the summer to check back on our progress.

In order to check that our response from the work in April was having the impact that we had intended - and to further explore whether our Service was continuing to meet the needs of children and families as the pandemic continued - a second COVID-19 Audit was scheduled for June 2020.

The audit tool from the previous project was adjusted accordingly to reflect our updated practice standards, and was then used to audit a further 23 cases during a period from March until mid-June. As with before, the tool focused in particular on our approach to risk assessment, visiting, and ensuring child centered work, and was accompanied by a parents/carer's views and child's voice audit.

Pleasingly, the audit findings once again provided some important assurances about the strengths of our practice as the pandemic had continued. Notably the report showed that:

- Almost all cases looked at (96%) had a COVID-19 risk assessment placed on the child's file by the required date.
- Relevant health information to inform our COVID-19 risk assessments was being clearly recorded in the majority of the cases reviewed (83%) - indicating a clear improvement from the last audit.
- Almost all children (87%) were seen within statutory timescales, compared to 61% in April, also indicating a clear improvement in our practice.
- It was felt by the report authors that in 82% of cases families had received a high level of practical support and appropriate advice, including signposting to (and liaison with) key external agencies or services.

The report also evidenced our evolving approach to visiting children as the national lockdown restrictions had begun to ease, with 65% of children being last seen face-to-face, in comparison to 45% in April.

Importantly, the analysis also provided some useful indications as to where our practice could still be improved upon. Key themes were that:

- Our contact with the support networks of families had declined in comparison to April, and that our standard of ensuring fortnightly contact with relevant partner agencies was also only evident in 35% of the cases looked at.
- Our standard of ensuring weekly contact with parents was evident in 64% of cases, but contact with non-resident parents was much less regular - with only 29% contacted fortnightly.
- Although all of the virtual visits that were seen on files were recorded correctly, only 75% were recorded within our WBC required timescales.
- Of the 19 children that were consulted as part of the child's voice audit, 12 were unable to identify clearly what their social worker offers or does to help, possibly indicating some confusion about our role in their lives.

Alongside our usual process of extracting and tracking all individual actions that the audit process had presented for the individual workers involved, the report was again used to develop a Service-wide action plan to address some of the broader practice themes. Given that the bulk of these findings related to compliance issues - notably in terms of ensuring contact with professional and family networks, as well as recording - much of these learning points were communicated immediately to Team Managers, and are now also being used to inform further revisions to our existing Practice Standards for visiting.

Notably, some of the recommendations related to areas of practice that go beyond our response to COVID-19, including our approach to direct work with children and Safety Planning. These will be cross-referenced with findings from other related audit activity across our Quality Assurance programme, to ensure that they are responded to in a coherent and joined-up manner.

With national restrictions currently beginning to tighten again, and with restrictions set to last well into the New Year, a follow-up audit is currently being planned for January 2021 to continue to quality assure our response to the pandemic.

Support for Schools and Settings

The preparation for the reopening of schools to the wider pupil population in September commenced back in the summer term. School leaders were supported with round table sessions to help unpick and understand the requirements of the DfE guidance including the Public Health requirements for safe operation of schools from September onwards.

This work continued over the summer holiday period with work undertaken on home to school transport arrangements to ensure that pupils could make the safest possible journeys to school and for these journeys to reflect as best possible the revised operating times and entrance and departure arrangements being made by schools.

As schools recommenced fully from September attendance has been high at c90%, which is better than the national picture, but reflective of the south east attendance ranges. Schools provide a daily return to the DfE detailing attendances, which is then shared with the local authority to assist in our planning and support.

Schools have been able to remain open throughout the pandemic period and no Wokingham school has closed. Whilst we have received notifications about positive

cases in schools, it is clear that these are community infections coming into schools and then, through the appropriate actions, on ward transmissions within schools have been prevented. Where an outbreak is defined as two connected cases within one setting, we have had one incidence of an outbreak in a school. In this instance, we stood up an Incident Management Team (IMT) that comprised of Public Health England, the Thames Valley Local Health Protection Team, our own Public Health consultants, Children's Services colleagues and the school in order to plan the approach in support of the school being able to remain open.

Throughout the pandemic the Assistant Director Learning, Achievement & Partnerships has provided a daily update to all school leaders in the borough, keeping in touch with changing guidance and providing a key link between practice in schools and information provided from the DfE. A weekly news bulletin has also continued to inform all school staff of key developments and access to supporting materials.

School governors have also been supported with additional briefing sessions from Governor Services to explore requirements and to be able to support leaders in decision making and the Wokingham Schools Hub website continues to be a source of information for schools with a special landing page for practitioners and leaders and resources and materials signposted.

All school leaders are invited to a weekly leadership round table discussion which focusses on sharing best practice, learning from other jurisdictions and areas as well as providing an opportunity for solutions focussed approaches and gathering intelligence to feedback to the DfE and identification of areas of policy requiring further clarification. Many Head Teachers are regular attendees at this session and there is a good turn out each week.

In addition further specific focussed activity has taken place across a range of service areas within the Council. Including the School Improvement Team supporting key areas of work in schools, such as assessment, transition, provision for Newly Qualified Teacher induction assessment, reviewing protocols and best practice for remote learning and learning in a Covid Secure classroom environment.

The Educational Psychology service worked to provide curriculum materials for schools to use based on a Recovery Curriculum model looking at mental and emotional health and well-being.

The ICT in schools team has been running specific sessions supporting teaching staff in building skills in the use of new technologies to support remote learning and to navigate the safeguarding elements of any online provision appropriately.

The Education Welfare Team are supporting schools with encouraging families to enable pupils to attend school this term building trust and positive relationships for a safe return to education.

The schools HR service has been providing scenarios and FAQs in relation to supporting staff during this period including guidance on shielding and quarantining.

Officers are also currently undertaking national training as part of the DfE initiative to support mental health and wellbeing for pupils and will be running train the trainer session

for school staff to enable capacity building within the system for mental health and emotional well-being support.

As we move forward in preparation for a predicted increase in cases both nationally and locally, we have developed a Children’s Services Taskforce. This Taskforce brings together colleagues who are able to proactively plan and take action to mitigate the impact of further cases, but also continue to ensure responses where necessary (either to positive case notifications or general queries from schools and settings).

This taskforce will undertake a range of activity including:

- the monitoring of covid prevalence and attendances within schools and settings,
- ensure contact with all schools, settings, and provider services (children’s residential homes, independent schools, FE provision, etc.),
- provide call handling and risk rated support for settings
- work with commissioned services on responding to covid related incidents
- continue to ensure that we are operating, and supporting others to operate, within the context of national guidance and local intelligence.
- manage communications to schools and settings (in liaison with the Councils communications team)
- set up and co-ordinate IMT activity as required
- provision of daily updates to schools and settings

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	N/A	N/A	N/A
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	N/A	N/A	N/A

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
N/A

Cross-Council Implications
N/A

Public Sector Equality Duty
Please confirm that due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty has been taken and if an equalities assessment has been completed or explain why an equalities assessment is not required.

List of Background Papers
N/A

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