

TITLE	Review of Covid-19 response
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 22 March 2021
WARD	(All Wards);
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Children's Services - Carol Cammiss

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

To provide an update and review of Children's Services response to Covid 19.

RECOMMENDATION

This document is for information and update.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

In response to Covid 19, Children's Services amended how it delivered its services. 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, national restrictions and Public Health guidance on social distancing and good hygiene and Department of Education Covid specific guidance and amendments to legislation.

Children's services have reported to a range of forums and bodies in relation to its work in a covid context, this has included, the Department of Education, OFSTED, Berkshire West Safeguarding Children Partnership and the Corporate Parenting Board. On the 5th November 2020 a report was shared at Children Overview and Scrutiny Board which provided an overview of our educational support to schools and settings and a summary of the changes and adaption undertaken within Children's Social Care. This is also included a summary of audits undertaken in April and June 2020 looking at our social care practice in a Covid context.

This report will provide an update of our ongoing response to Covid 19

Background

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic represents a time of severe pressure across society, which we know presents heightened levels of risk for some children. It is, therefore, especially important that these children continue to receive the services and support they need. Wokingham's aim is to:

- continue to prioritise the safeguarding, and protect the welfare, of vulnerable children and young people

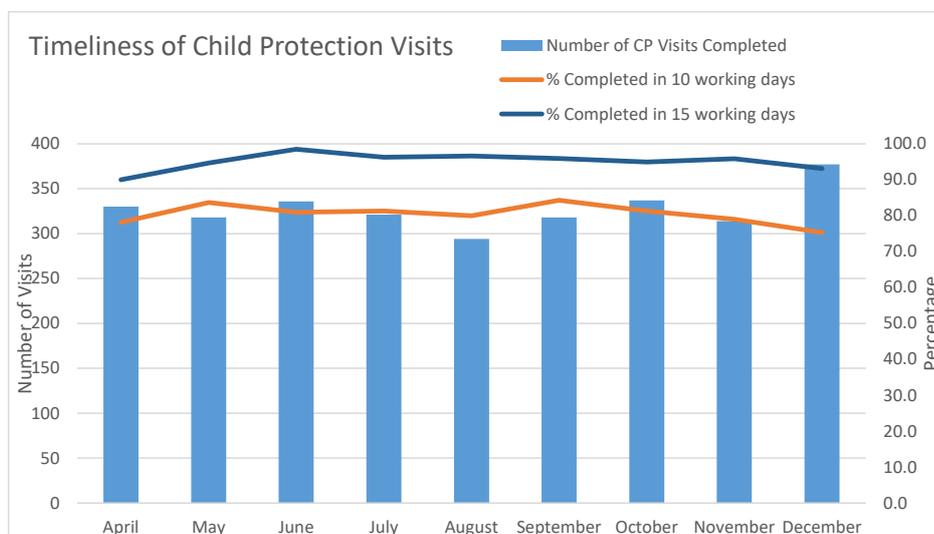
- maintain delivery of children’s social care during the pandemic
- support schools and settings to maintain children and young people’s learning during the pandemic

Social Care

During the Covid period children social care have observed a reduction in the number of Contacts that that it receives at the Front Door (Duty Triage and Assessment Team). There has been a 9% reduction in a Contact which is when an agency shares information via a Multi-Agency Referral form, or the service is contacted in relation to the concerns of a child. There has also been a 30% reduction in the number ‘Contacts’ that progress on for a social Care assessment. In relation to more complex cases our data and intelligence do not identify a clear pattern. The cases of note are from different sources and present with different issues. While some may share similar age and stage in development, the pattern we have identified is that the cases are diverse in their context and nature. In response to this lack of tangible pattern, our staff need to be curious and astute to the cases that present and are open. In response to these variables and reductions in Contacts, we have shared this overview with our partners and have also communicated with the public and voluntary sector.

After the introduction of the initial lockdown in March 2020, individual risk assessments were introduced to determine whether face to face or virtual visits were appropriate. Child Protection cases were not deemed suitable for virtual visits unless in exceptional circumstances. Visiting and engaging with children has been a key focus of our work throughout the year and our data indicates that over 95% of all visits carried out to children on Child Protection Plans since April 2020 have been conducted face-to-face.

Children subject to a Child Protection plan have been seen consistently within a 15 working day timescale (the majority within 10 days); exceptions have tended to be down to periods of self-isolation and a Teams preference not to conduct a visit with a different Social Worker for the sake of a few days.

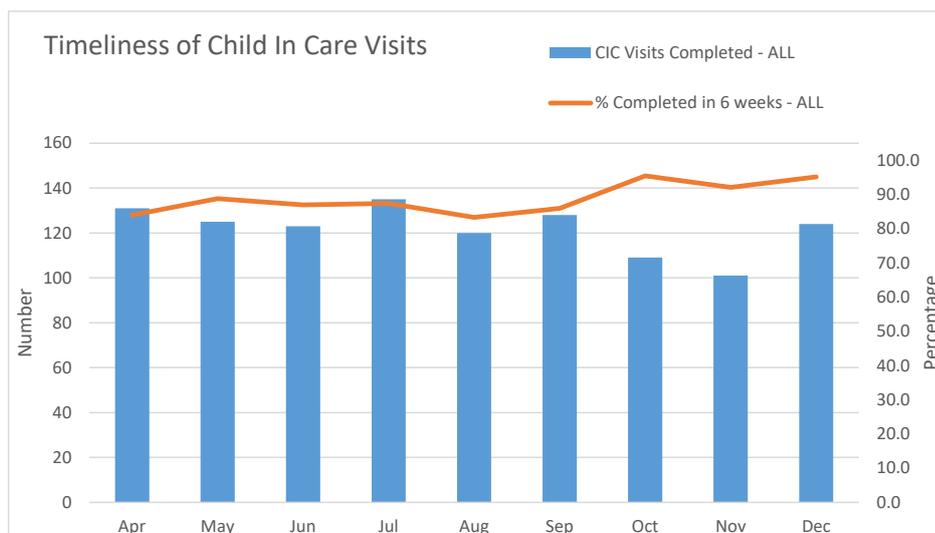


Visiting children looked after children and Care leavers

Whilst there have been no blanket changes to our social work practice and care of our looked after children and care leavers, coronavirus brings additional risks and a layer of complexity that may necessitate some different ways of working.

Since the lockdown in December all meetings and looked after reviews are taking place remotely by phone, and where possible video call. Whilst allocated workers endeavour to visit our children and young people in their placements regularly, and in line with statutory timeframes (wherever possible), there have been some adjustment to this. Where adjustments are required this has been done in consultation with the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO), the child and the child's placement. Workers are also using a range of other social media to remain in contact with their children and young people between visits. Since 'What's App' has been installed on the work phones this remains a popular way to communication with our children and care leavers. Workers can now quickly 'check in' to ensure that children and young people are well and have all that they need and reassure them that we are holding them in mind.

Children in Care have been seen consistently every 6 weeks, except where their plans allow for a longer time between visits.



Care leavers are a particularly vulnerable group of young people. Coronavirus (COVID-19) heightens this, because care leavers may be financially vulnerable and at risk of increased levels of anxiety and isolation. During periods of national restriction this is extenuated as informal support networks and direct contact are impacted. Some of our care leavers are still finding the Covid-19 restrictions difficult. Our Personal Advisors (PA) have been creative in undertaking visits with our more anxious care leavers who are worried about the spread of the Covid-19 virus. These have included taking young people on walks and being in the open fresh air. In turn they have experienced a high-quality engagement by changing the way we conduct the visits. The introduction of technology has also seen a higher level of engagement and young people being available to engage and meet virtually with their PA's.

Foster carers

We are grateful to all foster carers who have continued to care for our looked after children and manage their busy lives while keeping them safe and complying with the restrictions imposed as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

We recognize the importance of maintaining a stable home for children wherever possible. In most cases, we expect that children will continue living with their foster carers, observing government guidance on self-isolation and social distancing in the event that someone is either symptomatic or the household is self-isolating. To date only one placement has been destabilized due to Covid.

Education

Since the start of the pandemic Wokingham Borough Council has provided continuous support to schools and settings via a daily email update briefing to headteachers with information and guidance, and weekly leadership roundtable held for all headteachers to explore responses to matters of the moment and share best practice.

We have also provided a programme of three roundtable sessions per week for key school staff to develop responses to things such as provision of remote education, managing assessment, effective gap closing, and we will be focussing on Mental Health and Well Being for all during this spring term.

We have been in regular contact between schools and attached officers to gather intelligence to inform where and what support is required and provided ICT support to build system capacity/ confidence with delivery of teaching via new platforms, including training for a wide range of school staff on new technologies.

In addition, a Covid Task Group has been working to build capacity in supporting the response is co-ordinating information and support for schools across teams and monitoring the direct impact of Covid transmission on school delivery and attendance. We have also organised a dedicated email address whereby schools can obtain quick responses to Covid related queries and concerns.

The School Improvement Team and the Educational Psychology Team have worked in partnership to co-deliver the DfE Well Being for Education Return Programme – a series of workshops and practical materials to support the Emotional and Mental Health and Well-Being of pupils and staff. These sessions continue through to March 2021.

Since the start of the year additional extraordinary round tables have been held with school leaders to address system responses to Lateral Flow Testing set up, s44 Health and Safety at Work Act letters from staff and trade union activity, staffing availability, Covid Secure risk assessments for operation, remote learning requirements and digital devices.

These sessions have given headteachers instant access to School Improvement team support for locally based decision making and guidance; Wokingham Borough Council Health and Safety officers and guidance on working from home as well as support for risk

assessment quality assurance and walk throughs; access to the Council's Public Health consultant advice and information generally and on the new variant; and facilitated Military support for Lateral Flow testing logistics where requested.

Remote Learning

Throughout the pandemic, and specifically during the first and second school lockdowns, our school improvement service have provided advice and support for school in respect of remote learning. This has included advice and guidance as well as direction to resources to support schools delivering their curriculum online.

In the autumn term of 2020 the DfE announced the Get Help With Technology Scheme to support laptop allocations for Y3-Y11 pupils. We estimate that DfE originally allocated around 700 laptops to WBC schools/academies as part of this scheme. The allocations were subsequently reduced, then later restored.

The great majority of these laptops have now been ordered by schools. Most are now delivered, but some primary schools are still waiting for laptops to arrive that they were only able to order recently. Schools are making a variety of local arrangements to ensure children have access to devices, e.g. loaning out existing school laptops, sourcing devices from local community.

Since March 2020, WBC have provided 235 laptops to Children with a Social Worker through a DfE Covid scheme and 50 laptops to Children in Care/Care Leavers through an ongoing Council-funded scheme.

We continue to provide laptops to Children with a Social Worker (Children in Care/Care Leavers, Child in Need and Child Protection) using WBC funds (although the funding source for CIN + CP laptops isn't yet known). Since we have already provided a large number of laptops to young people in this group, the numbers currently being requested are fairly low.

Throughout the pandemic WBC Children's Services have continued to liaise with colleagues across the Council and local Charities (including First Days) that are working together to repurpose donated laptops to distribute them to those in need.

Free School Meals and Home to School Transport

We have responded quickly to meet the needs of children eligible for Free School Meals and/or Home to School Transport.

In respect of Free School Meals, we have provided support to schools in relation to advice and guidance on ensuring that FSM contractors are able to continue to provide meals to pupils who are isolating, ordering via the initial government arrangement with EdenRed during the first lockdown, and providing access to WBC commissioned services to support the maintenance of FSM delivery for those isolating and for children not at school during lockdown periods.

During subsequent lockdown, we have worked with providers on ensuring appropriate voucher schemes and hamper style deliveries were available to parents. WBC has made

full use of the Covid Winter Grant to support and fund FSM during school holiday periods and the Council has committed to supporting the continuance of FSM during holiday periods not covered by central government funding.

In respect of Home to School Transport we have had to be agile in our response to lockdowns where they have affected school attendance. We have ensured that all children eligible for a school place and eligible for HTST have continued to receive the service and have worked with providers to support their loss of income where we have suspended delivery where transport has not been needed. We have provided this support to ensure that provision is available as we have come out of such lockdown periods.

Emotional well being

The mental well-being of children remains a priority for both Social Care and Education. If a child/young person is receiving help from CAMHS they are able to access additional telephone contact if things become more difficult.

Berkshire West CCG, Wokingham LA, West Berkshire LA and Brighter Futures for Children have jointly commissioned the online counselling service Kooth.

Kooth is an online counselling and emotional well-being support service providing young people aged 11-18 years (up to 19th birthday) in Berkshire West with a safe and secure means of accessing support with their emotional health and wellbeing needs from a professional team of qualified counsellors. Kooth has no referrals, thresholds or waiting lists. Young people can access this service anonymously by signing onto the Kooth site.

Some of the main Challenges of working in the current context and the impact of Covid 19

- Balancing adaptations to practice promoting staff welfare and keeping children safe
- Predictive modelling with regard to demand - requires us to be as agile and resilient as possible to respond to changes
- Early response to fast changing Public Health England advice and guidance
- Ensuring any adapted activities reflect the needs of the child
- Delays to court proceedings and expectations around contact for children with their family
- Non-accidental injuries to pre-mobile children. Challenges in relation to identifying patterns given small numbers and fast-moving situation
- Mitigating the impact of remote working on the Children's Services Workforce.
- The need to continue to develop and support the workforce to deal with these issues and challenges
- Being prepared for uncertainty
- Impact on partner services for children with disabilities e.g. Short breaks and holiday schemes
- Some restrictions on visiting some children in some provisions
- Maintaining and supporting schools and settings in respect of significant and rapid changes in government guidance

What has worked well in the current context of Covid 19

- The commitment of our staff and their ability to adapt to the changing context and continue supporting and safeguarding children
- Enabled SMART working for all staff through Microsoft Teams.
- Maintained COVID-compliant office space for a small cohort of workers (including Social Workers, Admin, and Team/Service Managers) at both Shute End and Here4U.
- Assured and maintained appropriate levels of PPE to enable Social Workers to visit children
- The high level of face-to-face visits completed where possible.
- Regularly updated and published Practice Standards guidance for Social Work staff to ensure their safety while practicing Social Work.
- Introduced Personal Risk Assessments for Clinically Vulnerable staff to assess suitability of making face-to-face visits.
- Provided a regular Director's Briefing throughout the pandemic
- Introduced Mental Health First-Aiders across the organisation.
- Carried out a survey of staff.
- Adapted practice and used PPE to ensure Bridges Resource Centre could remain open, offering respite to children with disabilities.
- Introduced Virtual Visiting across our broad range of visit activity where necessary including the rollout of WhatsApp to children and staff - but continued face-to-face Child Protection visits where safe to do so.
- Adapted quickly to holding virtual/hybrid Child Protection Conferences, Child in Care Reviews and Child in Need meetings.
- Provided daily Covid related updates to schools and Headteachers
- Proactively worked with schools and Social Workers to allocate DfE laptops and internet access to those most in need as quickly as possible.
- Contacted all Young Carers and put support plans in place where necessary.
- Children in Care Council sent postcards to all Children in Care, signposting to support.
- Allocated an additional £5,000 for the support of Care Leavers over Christmas
- Creation of a £100k grant fund to support Early Years provision
- Schools round table and thematic online drop-in events

Analysis of Issues

Over the last year the social care and education teams have become adept at delivering their statutory duties and responsibilities within a pandemic and the varied local and national restrictions that have been in place during this time.

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)			
Next Financial Year (Year 2)			
Following Financial Year (Year 3)			

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

Cross-Council Implications (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?)

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.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

List of Background Papers

Contact	Service Social Care and Early Help Learning, Achievement & Partnerships
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