

Agenda Item 6.

TITLE	Children's Services Response to Covid-19
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 17 June 2021
WARD	None Specific;
LEAD OFFICER	Director, Children's Services - Carol Cammiss

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

To provide an update and review of Children's Services delivery and 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 and the 22nd March 2021 reports were 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 document provides a further update.

Background

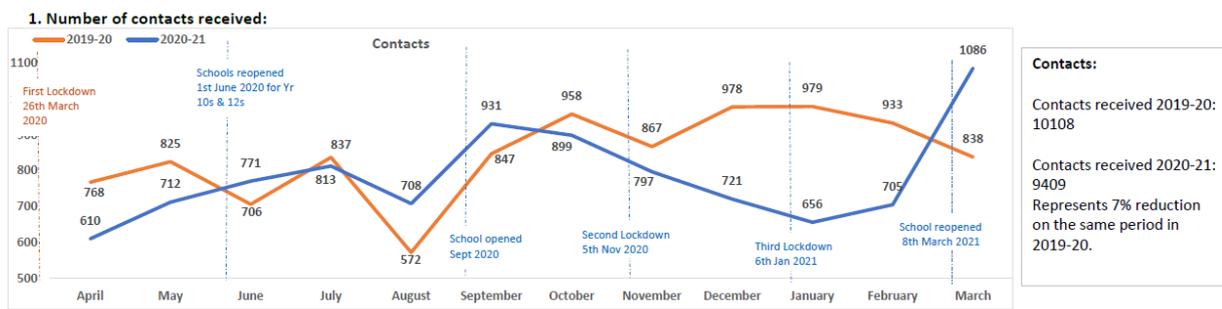
The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic represents a time of severe pressure across society, which we know presents heightened levels of risk for some children. It is, therefore, especially important that these children continue to receive the services and support they need. Wokingham's aim has been to:

- 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

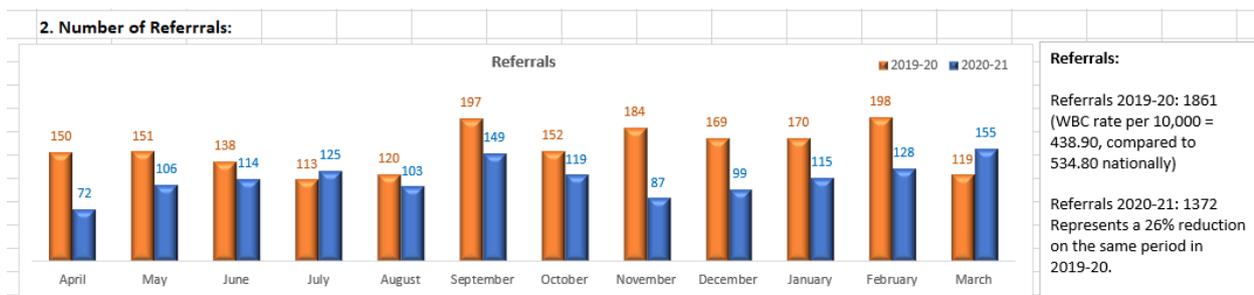
Analysis of Issues

Overview of Social Care activity

All cases that are open to Children Social Care commence their journey as a Contact to our Duty Triage and Assessment Team (DTA). DTA is often referred to as the ‘Front Door’. A Contact is where information is shared about a child with the Front Door, as a self-referral, a member of the public or another agency for example; Health, Police, a School. The information about the child in the Contact is reviewed by a duty manager and a decision is made about the outcome. This can include no further action, signpost to other services, or progress to a referral.

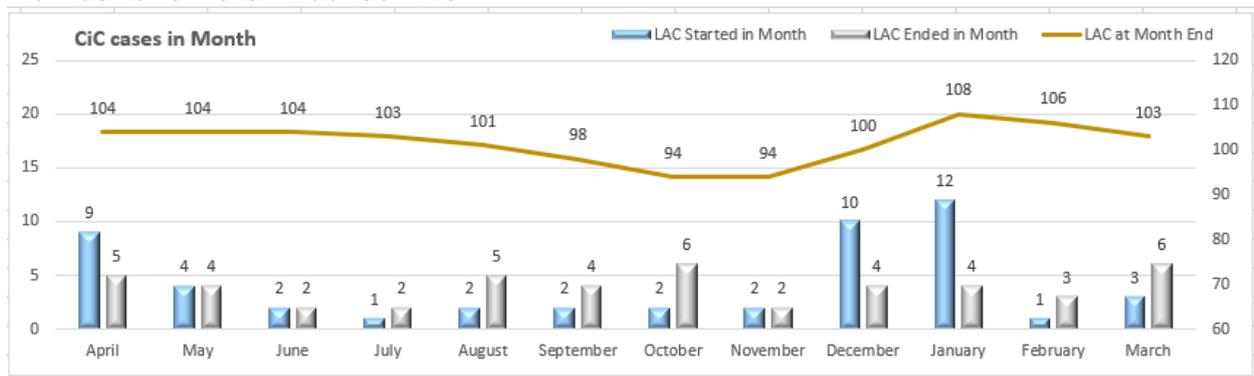


Throughout the year we have kept an overview on the number of Contacts made with our ‘front door’ to ensure that we were ready and prepared for any potential increase in children requiring a service. The table above provides a full year summary of Contacts and indicates that there was a decrease overall in the number of Contacts received by the front door during 20/21, in particular from October-20 until January-21. Throughout the year we worked closely with our partner agencies to ensure that children were being referred when there was an identified need. The data indicates that during the year 20/21 there was a 7% reduction in the total number of contacts received.



When a Contact progresses to an Assessment, this is considered a Referral. The table above indicates that during the year 20/21 for 11 months there was a reduction in the number of Contacts that progressed to a Referral, when compared to the previous year. Over the year this equated to a 26% reduction.

Number of children Looked After



The number of children who are looked after by Wokingham Childrens Services has remained relatively stable during the year 20/21. The table above highlights the number of children who become looked after and those who ceased being looked after in year. Children cease being looked after for a number of reasons, this includes reaching 18 years old and becoming a care leaver, returning home to birth parents, adoption and special guardianship order.

Focused updates on areas of Children Social Care

Children in Care and Care leavers

The extent of the impact of the pandemic and 'lockdown' on the care system and care experienced young people is yet to be fully understood. As lockdown measures begin to ease, we are starting to think how we can best understand what children and young people have been experiencing during the lockdown period as well as how children and young people can be best supported to resume 'normal' life, or the 'new normal', over the coming months and years and this will be our focus going forward.

For our children in care and care leavers we continue to provide a service as we did prior to the lockdown measures. All visits to our children in care are face to face at a minimum of 4 weekly, virtual visiting is used only in exemptions whereby a risk assessment has been undertaken. The Here4u team office has remained open throughout and recently there has been an increase in the staff attending the office, which is subject to ongoing health and safety assessments. The office is also now open to our care leavers and they can now visit by appointment. Our personal advisors have just completed the first 'in person' post lock down 'independent life skills workshop' for our care leavers. Our personal advisors remain committed to being creative about how we engage our care leavers and how they use technology ie WhatsApp to stay in touch.

We continue to work with our partner agencies for example Housing, Health and the NEET team to reduce the risk of homelessness, poverty, unemployment and mental health issues. The emotional wellbeing of our care leavers and children in care remains an area of focus. Kooth Online Counselling Service for 11 – 18 years (up to 19th birthday) has been available for them alongside the support they receive from CAMHS. For our older care leavers, their personal advisors are signposting them when required to talking therapies or their GP. They are also making use of the online APP Head Space, that provides emotional

well-being support. We also communicate with our care leavers through a newsletter providing updates on support and activities that are available to them.

The Fostering team

We know that these are unsettling, unprecedented and challenging times for everyone - not least those involved in caring for and supporting children in foster care. We are extremely grateful to our foster carers who provide support and stability to children and young people as foster care in their homes.

During the pandemic, we wanted to ensure that all our foster carers have access to the support they need from the fostering team. This includes: -

- Every household has been risk assessed so that the multi -agency team involved with each placement have a clear understanding of the needs in that home.
- Support is being provided through home visits, telephone calls and video calls as much as is needed by the child's social worker and the fostering supervising social worker.
- Our virtual school are sending out updates about online learning events to our foster carers to support children and young people in placement.
- Our fostering team are sending out regular newsletter to keep carers up to date with new opportunities, highlight the support and information on offer and maintain a strong link between staff and the carers.

There remains a high demand for foster placements, and we have seen an increase in the number of children who are placed with family and friends' carers. Whilst this is positive, it has resulted in an increase in the number of assessments being completed.

Fostering fortnight took place between the 10th -23rd May and we were able to complete our marketing activities which was successful with 9 inquiries. This is only slightly down from last year during Covid whereby we received 10 inquiries.

Bridges: Respite and Residential care for children with disabilities

Bridges has remained open since the start of the pandemic. For several families this service has been a real lifeline when other short breaks services were forced to close. Initially it had to reduce capacity due to members of the team having to shield and restrictions on the numbers of people allowed in the building. Bridges now has a full complement of staff back at work and has been able to work with families to ensure that all but three of the children have been able to have their short breaks reinstated. The children who are currently not using the service opted for Direct Payments which their families felt may suit them better through the restrictions. Bridges has also been able to introduce a small number of new children but still has a waiting list owing in part to the fact that the restrictions on the numbers allowed into the building at any given point in time have not yet been lifted. Whilst the impact of the pandemic has proved challenging, and changes to working practices such as the use of PPE has been an adjustment for the children, the team have worked hard to ensure that the children's experiences have continued to be positive.

Early Help

Throughout lockdown the Early Help service has continued to provide telephone and online support to families. As lockdown eases, our face to face work is increasing as staff start to return to working with children and families in their own homes and in community based settings, where it is safe to do so. We have seen an increase in children struggling to return to education and cases involving parental conflict and we work closely with our Early Help Hub partners to provide the right support to families at the right time.

Improvements in technology have enabled us to provide evidence based parenting support group's directly to families in their own homes. Due to the success of this new approach, we will continue to deliver online groups alongside our face to face offer when our centres re-open over the coming weeks, in line with changes in Government Guidance.

Staff supporting the Duke of Edinburgh scheme have been busy finding creative ways to help young people to achieve their bronze, silver and gold awards virtually, and we have increased numbers of young people waiting to sign up. Whilst we haven't been able to run the Explorers Extreme groups for young people with physical and learning disabilities, families have accessed online support and the young people are looking forward to getting back together safely over the coming weeks.

Our Supervised Contact Service has provided a safe space for families to have contact with their children and we are delighted to have moved into our brand-new premises, The Palm Centre in Wokingham. The new purpose-built space offers a calm, comfortable and child friendly environment to support Children in Care and their families to have positive and meaningful contact. Families are allocated one of four spacious contact rooms that are fully equipped with a range of age-appropriate toys and games, comfortable furniture, their own kitchen, dining, and toilet facilities and a private garden. Feedback from children, families and professionals has been extremely positive.

Education

Support for Schools & Settings

We have continued to provide support for schools and early years settings through a range of activities undertaken by Learning, Achievement & Partnerships.

We have maintained contact with schools via the daily update emails to all headteachers, and early years settings. This has provided localised intelligence to schools, as well as providing summaries and links to Government guidance and signposting to additional resources and information to support schools' approaches.

We have continued to facilitate weekly headteacher briefing drop-in sessions, which have both a thematic approach as well as enabling headteachers to raise concerns, share practice or ask questions. There are also additional themed sessions delivered for other school staff. Both of these types of events have been and continue to be well attended.

We have worked with the Thames Valley Health Protection Team to offer all Wokingham Early Years settings a visit to support their covid risk management arrangements.

During the pandemic the Education Welfare Service has offered a free service to all schools to support attendance and engagement of vulnerable pupils and in addition to our pre-existing traded service agreements. Therefore, every school in Wokingham has been offered a service which has been in the form of register consultations and direct work with families. We have worked with 165 pupils and families to date this academic year.

Attendance at school has remained positive with between 84% and 96% attendance of all children on a daily basis (data between 10th May – 28th May inclusive); and highs of 91% of pupils with an EHCP attending and 85% of children with a social worker attending throughout the period. Attendance for children eligible for Free School Meals has been between 85% and 93% of children attending on a daily basis for the same period.

Wokingham Total Attendance (all schools)	10-May	11-May	12-May	13-May	14-May	17-May	18-May	19-May	20-May	21-May	24-May	25-May	26-May	27-May	28-May
All Pupils	94 %	94 %	94 %	86 %	90 %	93 %	93 %	93 %	88 %	92 %	90 %	90 %	90 %	89 %	86 %
Children with EHCP	91 %	91 %	90 %	83 %	88 %	91 %	91 %	90 %	90 %	90 %	89 %	86 %	87 %	84 %	82 %
Children with a Social Worker	83 %	85 %	85 %	81 %	83 %	83 %	82 %	83 %	82 %	83 %	84 %	83 %	84 %	85 %	79 %
Children with FSM eligibility	93 %	93 %	90 %	82 %	88 %	91 %	90 %	92 %	87 %	90 %	88 %	87 %	88 %	88 %	85 %

Schools and Settings Surge Testing

At the time of submitting this report (14/06/21) we are engaged in the delivery of community based Covid Surge Testing within the wards of:

- Bulmershe and Whitegates
- Evendons
- Norreys
- Wescott

These areas were selected because they have experienced higher rates of transmission and a faster increase in cases in the recent period.

Surge testing involves testing as many people (who do not have symptoms) who live, work or study in a specific area as possible.

Positive tests with a high enough viral load will be sequenced to identify any further spread, enabling a better understanding of the variant and identifying if there are any more cases of this particular strand of the virus in the area.

We are working with schools and early years settings to encourage staff and children over the age of 12 who are working in or going to a school or early years setting in the target wards to undertake a PCR Covid-19 test during the surge testing period even if they are not showing symptoms. We are arranging delivery and collection of testing kits for staff and pupils aged 12+.

Emotional Wellbeing Offer

Wokingham Borough Council has reviewed how we support children with emotional wellbeing needs, and the review has considered the major changes that children and young people have experienced since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Council and partners have co-designed a new Emotional Wellbeing Model which will see the implementation of a series of improvements to the service offer to ensure children and young people receive the right support at the earliest opportunity. Families have told us that not knowing where to go is a barrier to young people accessing support around their emotional wellbeing and Wokingham Borough Council is committed to providing its families and young people with the option of a clear point of access for emotional wellbeing support and to provide a forum for professional support.

In summer 2021 Wokingham Borough Council, in partnership with Berkshire Healthcare Foundation trust, will be launching this model as a new way for Children and Young People with mild to moderate mental health needs to access support. This will be accessed via the 'Emotional Wellbeing Hub' our front door to emotional wellbeing support. A further element of the model includes a new Emotional Wellbeing service which is also accessed via the hub. This will consist of Primary Mental Health Workers providing direct support to children and young people and education/training support to schools and local professionals. This EWB service will work in partnership with our other local services which support children and young people's emotional wellbeing, such as Youth Counselling Services (ARC and Kooth) and the local Mental Health Support Team.

The main changes and improvements to the model are:

- **For CYP/ Parents / Carers:** A new single point of access (or "front door") for families looking for support around emotional health and wellbeing, but who may not know where to go, supporting families and young people to get help more quickly and effectively.
- **For local Professionals and Partners:** A Wokingham multi- disciplinary Emotional Wellbeing Forum will be established to help identify the best way to meet the needs of local children and young people and their families. The Forum will meet weekly with a range of partners with mental health expertise attending. Members of the Forum will provide knowledge, consultation, and support to lead professionals who would like to discuss the emotional health and wellbeing support options for a child or young person they are working with.
- **For All:** A joined up, holistic approach to providing the right services at the right time by the right agency, promoting access to early intervention and support and reducing the need for more specialist support in the future.

The expected benefits of the model:

- Effective support to children and young people around their emotional wellbeing needs.
- Prevention of needs escalating and having a significant negative impact on children and young people's lives and requiring specialist support.

- Improved and simplified access so that support can be accessed at the earliest opportunity
- Support for lead professionals to obtain case specific consultation, advice, guidance, and brokerage of support for children and young people on their caseload.
- Promote and raise awareness of the new and improved service to families, schools, and health professionals
- Promote the benefits of the new hub that will provide one front door to multidisciplinary teams and a continuity of care
- Promote how families can get in contact and how schools and health professionals can refer children and young people they feel would benefit from the service.
- Improved data collection to understand demand and need

New Provision – Online Youth Counselling

In response to increasing demand during 2020, WBC commissioned and launched ‘Kooth’ a 24/7 online counselling service. This was a new service within the existing mental health and wellbeing offer. The service went ‘live’ in July 2020 and Officers are in the process of extending the current contractual arrangements to ensure the service provision is able to continue. We are also exploring with the Provider the option of extending the service to young people up until the age of 25.

Mental Health Support Teams

In September 2019, WBC established a Mental Health Support Team (MHST) as part of the national Trailblazer Project for children, young people and their families in order to deliver services within an education setting. The team consisted of trainee Educational Mental Health Practitioners (EMHPs) and throughout 2020 they undertook training to become qualified EMHPs. The new service launched in January 2021 and is set to work with 12 selected local pilot schools. Funding for the MHST is in addition to the funding for other local EHWP services and has been made possible as a result of Wokingham submitting a successful funding bid to NHS England. The team is expected to cover a population of around 8,000 children.

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		

Next Financial Year (Year 2)	N/A		
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	N/A		

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

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

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
N/A

List of Background Papers
N/A

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