



## **CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**19<sup>TH</sup> JANUARY 2021**

### **COVID-19 RECOVERY UPDATE**

#### **REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES**

##### **Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with a detailed update on the work of the Children and Family Services Department over the Covid-19 pandemic.

##### **Policy Framework and Previous Decisions**

2. Leicestershire County Council's (LCC) Covid-19 Recovery Strategy (2020-21) sets out the key principles, governance structures and phases upon which recovery of the Council's functions and services will be based. This will help ensure a joined-up, consistent and well-informed approach throughout the recovery process, with key principles and approaches reflected, which will culminate in a transition to Departmental Service and Business Planning, utilising supplementary mechanisms to complement pre-existing governance and decision-making protocols of the Council.

##### **Service Delivery During the Pandemic and Service Recovery**

3. During Covid-19 most services within Children and Families continued to operate and deliver work with families and communities albeit in a different format.

##### **Targeted Early Help and Children's Social Care**

4. At the beginning of the first lockdown period, revised guidance was developed across Targeted Early Help and Children's Social Care to support staff in prioritising and adapting how services were delivered to respond to the Covid-19 outbreak. The guidance included a risk assessment for each child which informed the risk management plan including the frequency and type of visiting that is in place during the Covid-19 emergency.

5. Over the course of the pandemic the Covid-19 risk assessments have continued to inform the frequency and type of contact with children. All children are subject to an initial Covid-19 assessment at the point of referral and a formal assessment is now built into the workflow for children once assessments are completed and intervention from Children's Social Care continues. These assessments are reviewed and updated at set intervals or at a significant change in circumstances. Performance reports are now in place to provide oversight to the Covid-19 risk assessment process and the visit types that are in place. These are subject to scrutiny in monthly performance meetings led by the Assistant Director. This risk assessment has been reviewed in light of each national lockdown to ensure visits can continue to take place to those children that require it.
6. Services to the most vulnerable children are continuing, social workers and children and family wellbeing workers are working directly with children either in their homes, where needed, or via electronic methods (Skype and WhatsApp video calling).
7. As flexible working arrangements have become established and staff have become confident in using Personal Protective Equipment there have been increases in the number of face-to-face contacts with children. For some children judged to be most vulnerable and, for example, where child protection investigations are being undertaken, face to face contact has been maintained throughout the pandemic. Reports provide managers with oversight of all visits by type and frequency and careful monitoring reports are shared with the Department of Education fortnightly. Since May 2020 when reporting began consistently more than 75% of visits to children on Child protection plans have been face to face.
8. Contact arrangements from children in care were initially moved to virtual arrangements but since July have started to be safely managed in local children centres subject to strict safety arrangements.
9. Whilst most staff continue to work from home some teams, where necessary, are continuing to use office space safely, subject to social distancing arrangements. Regular keeping in touch and support via contact in supervision and team meetings are in place to prevent isolation of staff members.
10. The front door to Targeted Early Help and Children's Social Care has continued to operate, ensuring safeguarding concerns have been dealt with in a timely manner. Additional capacity has been put into the Service in order to ensure incoming referrals are dealt with in a timely manner to meet children's needs.
11. At the beginning of the pandemic in March a reduction in contacts was noted at the front door – most significantly requests for Targeted Early Help saw a fall

and it is likely that this was connected to the number of children absent from school.

12. However referrals to children social care, whilst reduced compared to 2019 averages, did continue to see a number of complex cases being reported and responded to and the number of Strategy discussions and child protection enquiries during Q1 and Q2 (April – September 2020) were significantly higher than 2019 averages. This resulted in an additional 164 children becoming subject to child protection plans during that period. Domestic abuse was a feature of many of those cases.
13. Increases in demand in September 2020, when schools re-opened, were less than expected and the number of contacts and referrals returned to levels similar to 2019 levels. Requests for Targeted Early Help have increased back to expected levels.

2020/21 Quarters 1 & 2	2019	2020	+/-
Contacts	11312	11015	-3%
Referrals	2958	2514	-15%
Assessments	2577	2321	-10%
Strategy Discussions	1038	1269	+22%
Section 47	762	1010	+33%
Initial Child Protection Conferences	410	483	+18%
Child Protection Plan Starts	358	442	+23%

14. Virtual group work programmes have been delivered and will continue to be delivered to young people and to parents and carers as part of parenting support programmes.
15. Foster Carer recruitment has continued over the last nine months, albeit in a virtual capacity through online events rather than at County Hall. From April to November there have been 443 enquiries in comparison to 336 for 2019/20 for the same timeframe. This has resulted in the approval of seven mainstream fostering households to date with two Independent Fostering Agency transfers, two transfers from other local authorities.
16. Adoption Panels are being successfully completed virtually. Consideration is being given to the use of Zoom/Microsoft Teams to ensure that applicants are able to participate in information evenings and Prospective Adopter training. Assessment visits to potential adopters are being completed virtually. Fourteen adopters have been approved from April to November, with 24 households in Stage one and a further 11 households in stage two of the assessment process. Eight children have been moved into their adoptive placements using Covid-19

risk assessments to support introductions. These risk assessments are signed off by the Assistant Director.

### **Education and SEND**

17. On 4<sup>th</sup> January 2021, the government announced a further national lockdown and the move to remote learning for all children and young people, apart from children of critical workers and those children who are vulnerable. During the first week of the January lockdown schools worked quickly to set up remote learning and the provision for children that need to be in school.
18. Over the course of the pandemic the Education Effectiveness Team has worked closely with Public Health to address a range of queries around changing guidance for schools and action needed to be taken following a positive case in school, over the Autumn term. Schools have made major adaptations to adjust to a new normal and deliver meaningful education for children both in school over the Autumn term and remotely over the course of the national lockdowns.
19. The Education Effectiveness Team has worked with schools throughout the pandemic to provide advice, guidance and support around the continued provision of education throughout lockdown and in opening schools back up to groups of children prior to the summer holidays. As well as a twice-weekly bulletin to schools there has been significant uptake on the emergency Out of Hours line. Virtual training has also taken place for school staff and governors. Leicestershire Education Excellence Partnership has co-ordinated support for schools including areas such as remote learning, catch up funding and recovery curriculum.
20. At 18<sup>th</sup> December 2020, 1,575 positive Covid-19 cases had been reported in Leicestershire schools during the Autumn term 2020 in 252 out of 317 schools. Cases peaked in mid-November and have reduced, especially in secondary schools. A small number of schools have experienced a significant number of cases, which usually appear to be in locations where community transmission is high.
21. The Admissions Service has continued to process school applications and school appeals have been heard remotely. In line with Department of Education guidance, the service resumed non-attendance processes and the issue of penalty notices where appropriate at the start of September. The approach continues to be to work with schools and families to ensure good attendance resumes as early as possible, and to seek to make a distinction between those parents/families that may be anxious about their child attending school given the current Covid-19 position, and those persistent non-attenders known to the Admissions Service prior to the restrictions imposed in the spring.
22. Since the re-introduction of measures there has been a reduction in the number of penalty notices for poor attendance (with only one case presently under

consideration) and no court proceedings have been implemented. Schools and families are able to access advice for students who are clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) and on supporting students who have family members who are CEV to re-engage in school through the inclusion service.

23. Many Early Years settings have remained open throughout the pandemic, particularly for vulnerable children and those children of key workers. The Early Years' Service worked with childcare providers across Leicestershire to support the full re-opening of Early Years settings in the Autumn Term. All pre-schools and day nurseries reopened in September 2020, although some childminders chose not to reopen. During the Autumn term, whilst more children returned to their childcare provider (9,222), there are 10% fewer funded hours being accessed and 20% fewer two year olds accessing their free entitlement. Early years providers are able to remain open for all early years' children during the national lockdown.
24. Early Years and Childcare advisers have remained in contact with providers who have remained open throughout the pandemic or who re-opened in September to offer support and guidance. Training for the Early Years sector is being delivered online and work has taken place across the last few months to ensure further training can now be offered online rather than through face to face training groups. The Early Years Area Special Educational Needs advice has been delivered remotely, rather than in settings, to ensure Early Years Children with Special Educational Needs remain supported. Early Years Advisors have also been offering support and advice on activities that can be done to support children at home.
25. Although providers have been funded regardless of whether children attended or not during the first lockdown, those who remained open suffered a greater financial burden. More recently providers are faced with the challenges of maintaining high quality provision whilst having to close bubbles and self-isolate staff when necessary. Not all parents are confident to return to the early years provision or require the childcare provision that they once did as some have lost their jobs. Providers are having to adapt their provision and routines including inductions for new children as 'show rounds' to new parents have had to be halted or offered in a different way.
26. Services across education and SEND continue to support families and schools on a risk-assessed basis, working, in the main, remotely, attending virtual meetings. Where necessary staff are undertaking planned visits to schools or the child's home. All visits are by negotiation and with the appropriate protective measures.
27. Remote contacts and risk assessed home visits with PPE have been undertaken to children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. Children continue to have access to short breaks where this is assessed as part of their support package, including overnight short breaks where needed. Parents/carers who receive Direct Payments have been offered support and

advice about continuity of support through the pandemic and social workers have maintained regular contact with families and schools and have been able to amend support to respond to changing needs.

28. The SEN Assessment Service has continued to operate at close to full capacity during the pandemic and performance regarding Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) Needs Assessment remained high. Since October there has been a significant increase in the number of assessment requests, and this is likely to have some impact on overall timeliness of new Plans.
29. The Local Authority has communicated with all schools on a very regular basis throughout the pandemic. Schools are aware that the 'easements' by which 'reasonable endeavours' to provide the support within a child's EHCP have ended and that the duty to provide the support identified within the Plan once again applies. Where schools have struggled to provide this (for example due to staffing or space) they have been asked to work with parents/carers and SENA, Specialist Teaching Service or Inclusion Services to resolve the issues.
30. All annual reviews of EHCPs continue, with the majority being undertaken remotely. This has meant that SEN Caseworkers have been able to attend more reviews than in the past, due to less time spent travelling. Annual Review reports are being processed as usual and an increase in officer capacity means that these are being amended more quickly.
31. Decision-making panels for EHCP assessments and issuing of plans have continued virtually and parents and carers have continued to be advised of the outcomes of these panels.
32. Staff within the Specialist Teaching Service have continued to provide advice and support to children and schools during the pandemic. The majority of work has been undertaken remotely but since the start of the September term more visits to school are being made.
33. The Educational Psychology Service (EPS) has continued to undertake statutory work during the pandemic period. Individual child assessments as part of the EHCP Needs Assessment process have been undertaken using a variety of means. Where necessary these assessments have been qualified with an acknowledgment that there has not been an opportunity for direct face to face work with a child. The EPS has also worked closely with partners as identified by Leicestershire Education Excellence Partnership (LEEP) to produce a range of helpful information, for example, around mental health issues during Covid-19 and tips about coping with stress and anxiety. The Education Effectiveness Team is co-ordinating the wellbeing response with Public Health, EPS and other partners to ensure that staff in all types of schools and centrally employed teachers are trained in responding to wellbeing needs and that the resources for mental health and wellbeing support are clearly signposted and available. There has been high engagement with this programme.

## **Background Papers**

34. None

**Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure**

35. None.

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**List of Appendices**

36. None

**Equalities and Human Rights Implications**

37. None

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