



Report to Children's and Education Select Committee

Date: 29 September 2020

Reference number:

Title: Covid-19 Update

Relevant councillor(s): Cllr Mark Shaw, Cabinet Member Children's Services
Cllr Anita Cranmer, Cabinet Member Education and Skills
Cllr Tony Green, Cabinet Member Youth Provision

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Recommendations: For the Select Committee to note (a) the way in which Children's Social Care has continued to respond and adapt its approach to service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic, and (b) the work completed by the Directorate in supporting the full return to school from September 2020.

Children's Social Care

- 1.1 The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact upon statutory children's services. Protecting children and improving vulnerable children's outcomes is predicated upon direct, face to face interactions. It is also based upon co-located teams with visible and available line management.
- 1.2 It became clear during March 2020 that reducing the risk of infection and protecting the community as well as our staff was of primary importance. As a result, visits to children had to stop, unless there were extreme circumstances. The service took a number of proactive and robust steps to maximise the collective ability to still keep children safe and protect the most vulnerable. These steps were presented to the Children's Social Care and Education Select Committee in June 2020.
- 1.3 Since this time, the service has maintained grip and control of performance and this is monitored through weekly reporting on management oversight and virtual contact by team. In addition, a robust quality assurance programme has provided team level information on the strength of work within the service. These mechanisms ensure that standards are maintained, and that children and young people are protected.
- 1.4 Over recent months, as lockdown measures continued, the service has seen an increase in both the number of referrals and those with complex casework scenarios.

In the majority of cases, these are families that have not been previously known to us and potentially demonstrate the pressures they are facing are a direct consequence of covid-19. In addition, the service is actively supporting a number of older young people to stay safe in the community. In order to manage the increased levels of risk as the lockdown period progressed, the service gradually increased the number of physical visits to children and young people.

- 1.5 Unusually, during August 2020, we also saw a greater proportion of individuals self-referring into the service, which is a significant shift compared to previous trends.
- 1.6 On 19 August 2020, in preparation for the return of the majority of children and young people into education settings, the service released a revised set of mandatory social care practice standards. The over-riding purpose of these standards was to increase the number of physical visits to children, young people and their families in line with statutory requirements.
- 1.7 Throughout the pandemic, the service observed that for some specific cohorts of children and young people the use of virtual contact was well received and enabled social workers to form a stronger relationship with that child or young person. This was particularly evident for care leavers and some children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Moving forward, in very specific and well managed circumstances, the service will continue to allow some contact with children and young people to take place virtually. In these circumstances the rationale for which type of visit or contact is completed must form part of management oversight records with direct analysis and consideration of the risks noted. It is expected that where risk and need of the individual is high physical visits will take place.
- 1.8 The service will continue to act with care to meet our individual and collective health and safety obligations and this means using continual risk assessments to judge situations and scenarios, continued use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), adherence to government guidance and to act in the best interests of children.
- 1.9 A positive observation of the Covid-19 restrictions in recent months has been the availability of all staff and partners to attend statutory meetings such as professionals meetings, case conferences, looked after reviews, core groups and strategy meetings. As a result of this, the service will continue to use modern technology to undertake certain meetings including the use of a hybrid model where necessary with some participants being socially distanced in a room and others being present on screen. It is important to note that the rationale for how a meeting is constructed must include relevant views of the child, young person and family.
- 1.10 It is likely that, as children return to education settings and begin to discuss their experiences since March, the service may see an increase in the number of contacts and referrals although; at this stage it is too early to report against. In addition, there may be more contextual information provided by partners for those children already known to the service which will need to be considered.

1.11 The service will continue to focus on the most vulnerable children, young people and their families during the next few uncertain months. This will be achieved by maintaining the systems and practice we have already used and ensuring that our leadership and strategic direction is both flexible and clear.

Full Return to School

1.12 The Department for Education (DfE) decided to partially close schools as a response to the Coronavirus pandemic on 20 March 2020. Schools remained open from this point for children of keyworkers and vulnerable children (designated as those children with either Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) or those open to social care). For these vulnerable children, professionals working with them discussed whether, on balance, the risk of them being at home was greater than the risk of them being in school. A further opening was made at the start of June, where children in Reception, Year One and Year Six were encouraged to return to school where possible alongside additional provision for pupils in Year Ten in secondary schools. The government mandated a full return to schools for the Autumn Term.

1.13 At each stage of the process, Buckinghamshire Council has provided support and guidance to schools to ensure that:

- Schools have access to the latest national guidance;
- Where information changes we provide clarity around those changes;
- Additional guidance related to our local context is shared and
- Schools have had access to Buckinghamshire Council staff to help address queries and concerns.

1.14 Specifically this has included:

- a) Twice weekly meetings with the Corporate Director of Children's Services (DCS), and other officers in Children's Services and Public Health with chairs of the School Partnerships to discuss schools' responses to the crisis and co-produce work that supports schools. This has raised a number of themes including supporting staff wellbeing, managing HR issues and communicating changes effectively to parents.
- b) Twice weekly meetings with the Department for Education led by the DCS to raise concerns with any guidance issued and to seek clarity on issues that directly affected Buckinghamshire.
- c) The creation of a website for schools containing a repository of government information as well as responses from Buckinghamshire Council teams in a FAQ format which has been updated daily.

- d) Utilising staff across the directorate (especially those who were unable to continue their daily work during this period) as School Support Officers who called schools on a weekly basis to ensure that any issues that they had were addressed rapidly.
- e) Access to the Public Health advice and support through webinars for both Headteachers and Governors.
- f) The School Improvement Team have worked directly with schools that have required focussed help to ensure any issues have been addressed.
- g) Resources have been sent to pupils who have required them, specifically the Local Authority managed the rollout of the government laptop scheme which has seen over 850 devices sent to vulnerable pupils without access to the internet, providing them with a method of engaging with online learning. The Virtual School also ensured that all children in care had access to a device to support their learning in the first weeks of lockdown prior to the government scheme. In addition to this the Council delivered over 250,000 books to pupils before the summer break to ensure that they had access to quality literature.
- h) Distribution of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to all schools and early years settings across Buckinghamshire for use by staff with symptomatic pupils.

1.15 On the full return to school, there was significant work completed to provide schools with clarity and [guidance](#). This has included:

- a) [Support for providers in early years.](#)
- b) [Identification of key duties during re-opening.](#)
- c) [A framework to support national guidance.](#)
- d) [Planning Checklist.](#)
- e) Specific guidance regarding the wearing of face coverings in schools.
- f) An Outbreak Guide from the Public Health Team, to provide an overview of the framework for the response to COVID-19 outbreaks that occur in schools and other early years settings within Buckinghamshire.
- g) Guidance from Public Health and Education to support schools with planning for 'bubbles', mixing pupil groups and providing wrap-around care.
- h) Business Continuity Planning for School Transport.
- i) Information from Buckinghamshire Grammar Schools on changes to the timing of the Secondary Transfer Test.

1.16 It was well understood that during the first few days of the autumn term there would be a period where schools would need to support their pupils in adapting to the changes that have needed to be made for social distancing. As a result, the expectation was that schools would phase their opening as required up until Friday 11 September 2020, with a view that all classes should have returned full time by that point. The indication is that all schools achieved this in the specified timeframe and anecdotal information shows an almost complete return.

1.17 The Council has commissioned work to support the wellbeing of school leaders, staff and students as they return to school – this work is being led by Aspire, the secondary Pupil Referral Unit. The release of funding from central government for a specific and [similar scheme](#) has allowed us to expand this work and incorporate this into the project plan.

1.18 As at Friday 11 September 2020, 100% of schools were open. There have been 15 incidences where schools have had to close year groups or send pupils home due to pupils or staff testing positive for Covid-19. In each case, the issue has been addressed directly with the school and the service has worked closely with Public Health to support. The School improvement Team hold a central record of each case to support our understanding of the situation across Buckinghamshire.

1.19 Throughout this period, there has been regular communication with schools, including:

- All updates to local guidance have been sent to schools directly.
- The chairs of the school representative bodies, Primary Executive Board (PEB), Buckinghamshire Association of Secondary Heads (BASH) and the Special School Head Teachers (SSHT) have contacted schools at least twice weekly since March in order to update them on current issues and actions that they need to take.
- The Director of Education has written directly to all parents in the county to thank them for their support.
- The communications team have sent out regular updates via social media to help parents.

1.20 The Transport Team has worked closely with schools to better understand their requirements across this period. [Guidance](#) has been issued to schools and parents to clarify the situation which includes:

- Where possible, asking parents to transport eligible students to school themselves and claim mileage for the journey.
- Provide additional public transport bus provision to ensure social distancing can be maintained (support from central government grant funding).
- Increasing the number of school busses on some routes.
- Support transport suppliers to understand and follow the specific [guidance](#) for transport operators issued by the Department for Transport and Public Health England.
- Guidance for parents and students on social distancing whilst using school transport.