Report to Children's & Education Select Committee

Date: Thursday 4 June 2020

Reference number: N/A

Title: COVID-19 Service Response

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

Author and/or contact officer: Tolis Vouyioukas, Corporate Director Children's Services

Recommendations: For the Select Committee to note the way in which the directorate has responded and adapted its approach to service delivery during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Content of report

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. The subject matter of social work means that it is vitally important to support staff and focus upon their well-being particularly during these unprecedented circumstances.

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 were, in chronological order:

- 16 March 2020: Daily Microsoft Teams meetings with managers and teams. These meetings enabled the service to focus on the most vulnerable and high risk cases, to ensure those children were safe.
- 20 March 2020: Changes were made to the electronic recording system so that work impacted by COVID-19 could be clearly recorded and accounted for.

Systems were devised to ensure each team had a real time view of their activity and ensure no children were missed out.

- 30 March 2020: A set of minimum standards for conducting virtual visits to families was published. These minimum standards had been developed during the previous two weeks and defined a virtual contact as one where the social worker has successfully persuaded the family to interact with them using video on an electronic device.
- 30 March 2020: Home visits to families could only take place if agreed by the relevant Head of Service and only when social workers had access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).
- 30 March 2020: A comprehensive audit and dip sampling process was set up so that the whole service including senior managers can have a clear understanding of the work of the service in the current high risk environment.

1.3 The decisions taken by the service in response to COVID-19 were put in place before any guidance from the Department for Education (DfE). However, senior leaders in the service had close contact with the DfE and OFSTED via regular Microsoft Teams meetings. The service carefully explained all of the actions that had been taken in detail, as highlighted above. Our response to COVID-19 was supported and indeed confirmed that a number of other local authorities were taking similar steps.

1.4 In addition to the daily contact with the DfE, senior leaders also had very regular contact with Buckinghamshire schools Headteacher representatives. These meetings, often daily and at least three times a week, have focused upon a number of concerns including the attendance at school of children who have a social worker. The number of children attending school in this category is between 10% and 13%. This is in line with other local authority areas and reflects the fact that school attendance in this context is voluntary and requires each family to make their own decision. Both individual schools and social workers have worked together to assist families to make the right decision for their children.

1.5 The current position across the service is that the number of home visits that are required to ensure children are safe has increased the longer restrictions have been in place. This increase reflects the growing pressures within some families and the need for some children to have their circumstances carefully assessed in ways that a video virtual visit does not allow.

1.6 Overall, the available evidence demonstrates that just over 96% of cases have had a contact with a social worker every 4 weeks during the COVID-19 period with 79% of those agreeing to video virtual contacts. There is evidence of managers having close oversight of the work and that where physical visits are required, these are carried out promptly, based upon the probable risk.

Family Support Service

1.7 Since 23 March 2020, the Family Support Service has had to reduce some aspects of service delivery and adapted others in accordance with Government and organisational directives.

1.8 The Family Centres which provide universal and targeted partnership support have closed and support for families has moved to an on-line and virtual support offer. One site has continued to be used by health for clinical meetings with highly vulnerable clients who are seen by appointment only and with strict social distancing adhered to supported by PHE and NHS safety measures.

1.9 The service continues to provide support to vulnerable families with complex needs currently through telephone and on-line platforms to provide face to face advice, support and guidance. Currently, the service is still supporting over 1030 children and young people to respond to any changes in circumstances that increase risks to children's safety. Using online tools and continuing to work with schools, albeit remotely, staff are becoming more innovative in ways of engaging families and for example capturing the voice of the child. For less complex needs, support on a one to one basis with young people continues, but is also restricted to virtual support, and we are working closely with other agencies including CAMHS and the school-based Mental Health Support Teams to provide appropriate support.

1.10 The Buckinghamshire Family Information Service (BFIS) has been extremely active, developing and sharing a huge amount of online resource ranging from virtual days out to home schooling tips and resources, customised local offer as well as providing a central point for current Government advice and significantly, a great deal of self-help support and guidance for residents who need lower levels of support. BFIS quickly developed a new home page from which all COVID-19 related links and resources can be easily found and work with lots of partner agencies to ensure it remains current and easy to navigate. Feedback for service users has been very positive.

1.11 Adult Learning has responded to closure of sites by moving a significant proportion of delivery online and are engaging hundreds of students through virtual classrooms and tutorials with positive levels of engagement and feedback. In addition, weekly "Keeping in Touch" newsletters have been produced to support those learners with whom they work. It includes very simple activities suitable for children under the age of five and school age children, with an emphasis on play rather than on activities linked to the curriculum. This reinforces a key message regarding the important role that play has in children's lives, supporting their well-being and their capacity to learn.

SEND Service

1.12 On 30 April 2020, the government put into place amended legislation in relation to Section 42 of the Children and Families Act. This relates to the help for children and young people as describe in their EHCP. For those in Buckinghamshire, the Act places on Buckinghamshire Council and Buckinghamshire Clinical Commissioning Group an absolute duty to provide the help as set out in the child's EHCP. However, from 1 May, for at least one month, the Section 42 duty has been eased. The absolute duty to deliver the provisions identified was modified by the regulations and now 'reasonable endeavours' must be used to deliver as much of the identified provision within EHCPs as possible. The modification of the duty does not mean that the provision set out in an EHCP does not have to be delivered, but rather that consideration is given in relation to each child as to what it is reasonably possible to deliver. This should take into consideration the local circumstances arising from the restrictions imposed by COVID-19 and the needs and views of the child/young person. Importantly, where unable to fulfil the Section 42 duty, decision making should be recorded and the young person and/or parents should be kept fully informed. This has required significant adaptation to the way the service delivers provision and the service continues to work with children and their families on the continued delivery of statutory provision, wherever possible.

1.13 Within the first week following the closure of schools for the majority of pupils, the SEND service worked quickly to provide guidance and support which included:

a) Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) needs assessment guidance to support the remote completion of this process, including co-production meetings.
b) Guidance to support the remote completion and conduction of annual reviews meetings.
c) Made available Specialist Teacher Provision for those children with EHCPs.
d) Specific support according to areas of need for those at home during this pandemic.
e) Local Area SEND Improvement.

1.14 All of this guidance can be found here for schools: *Schoolsweb - Bucks SEND Guidance* and here for families: *Families - Bucks SEND Guidance*

1.15 The key principles involved the support for settings and families during the pandemic shifting to a more remote operation of access, e.g. remote EP advice for an EHC needs assessment / virtual meetings / delivery of provision in EHCP. No statutory process has been altered or changed; it has just been delivered in a different way, meaning that commitments have remained, albeit creative in their delivery.

1.16 In addition, the service has developed risk assessment guidance and a template for completion for school attendance. This guidance has been written in line with the *Government guidance on SEN Risk Assessing*, in that it takes the following into account:

a) The potential health risks to the individual from COVID-19, bearing in mind any underlying health conditions. This must be on an individual basis with advice from an appropriate health professional where required.
b) The ability of the individual's parents or home to ensure their health and care needs can be met safely.
c) The potential impact to the individual's wellbeing of changes to routine or the way in which provision is delivered.
d) The risk to individuals who have EHCP if some or all elements of their EHC plan cannot be delivered at all, and the risk if they cannot be delivered in the normal manner or in the usual setting.
e) Any out of school or college risk or vulnerability, e.g. a young person becoming involved in dangerous behaviour or situations and requiring support from a social worker, including those where being in an educational setting can stop a care placement breakdown.

1.17 The risk assessment is not fixed; it is inevitably impacted by any changes in circumstances, such as staffing or environment and so will require ongoing consideration. This has required significant additional capacity to the usual output of the SEND service with EHC Coordinators and Area Team Managers coordinating this response.

Achievement and Learning Service - Support to schools

1.18 All teams within the Achievement and Learning Service have been focused on supporting schools during this period; much work, such as support for head teacher appointments, has continued albeit in a virtual form. A significant amount of extra work has been undertaken, often at short notice and with narrow timeframes for delivery. Key areas of support have included:

a) The creation of a resource to answer frequently asked questions

At the start of the school lockdown, the team created a repository of knowledge within the part of the council's website that is dedicated for school staff. Within the FAQ space we hold copies of all the relevant government publications related to the situation and carefully researched answers to questions that have been raised to us by schools. This resource continues to be updated daily the FAQ section of the website continues to receive more than 2000 visits a week.

b) School support officers

In order to provide further support to schools, the service organised additional support to schools. School support officers place weekly calls to all schools in the county, taking feedback on key issues, as well as providing updates on changes that have taken place and manging any queries raised. This work also allows the School Improvement Team to understand the type of issues and concerns raised by schools which will aid future planning.

c) Creation of an emergency contact database

One significant issue at the start of the pandemic was the fact that schools would often not be manning their reception desks. To ensure that officers from across the directorate had the ability to contact appropriate staff in schools an emergency contact database was set up. Schools submitted 'out of hours' contact details to allow appropriate contact from education and social care colleagues in emergency situations.

d) Post COVID-19 Action Plan

Within three days of the announcement of opening schools to more pupils, the School Improvement Team issued a plan for schools in response to DfE guidance. This has been well received by schools and addresses many of the common concerns and issues that schools were encountering.

e) Pupil Brokerage

To ensure that eligible children have been able to access a school place throughout the period of partial closure, the Early Years and Admissions teams have been running a brokerage service for parents in the event that their child's childcare setting or school has been closed. This has effectively ensured that parents of vulnerable children and key workers have been able to secure consistent childcare, including during the Easter holiday when required.

f) Pupil Laptop Scheme

Officers within the virtual school have been managing the allocation of over a thousand laptops from the government led scheme to prioritise those vulnerable and disadvantaged children who are entitled to access the devices, enabling them to continue their education remotely.

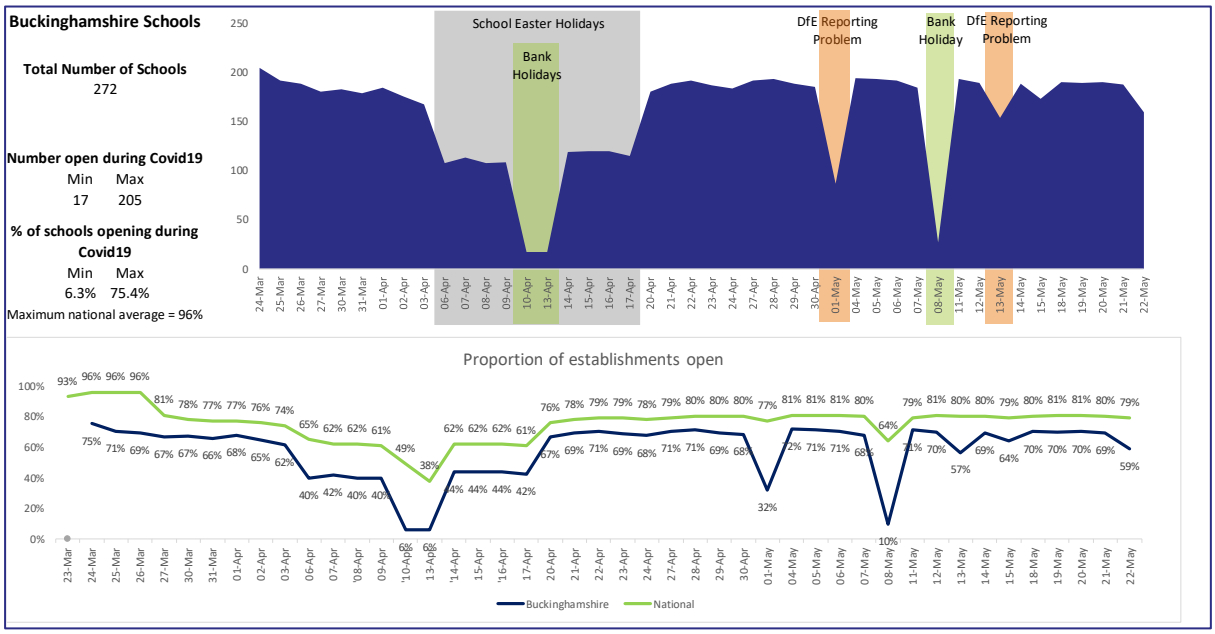
g) PPE provision

Officers have worked closely with Public Health and headteacher representatives to create a clear flowchart for schools identifying the need for PPE in specific situations. The education allocation of the PPE resource has been delivered to

schools. This has required over 4,000 individual items of PPE to be put into packs and delivered to schools through distribution centres with the support of the mutual aid cell.

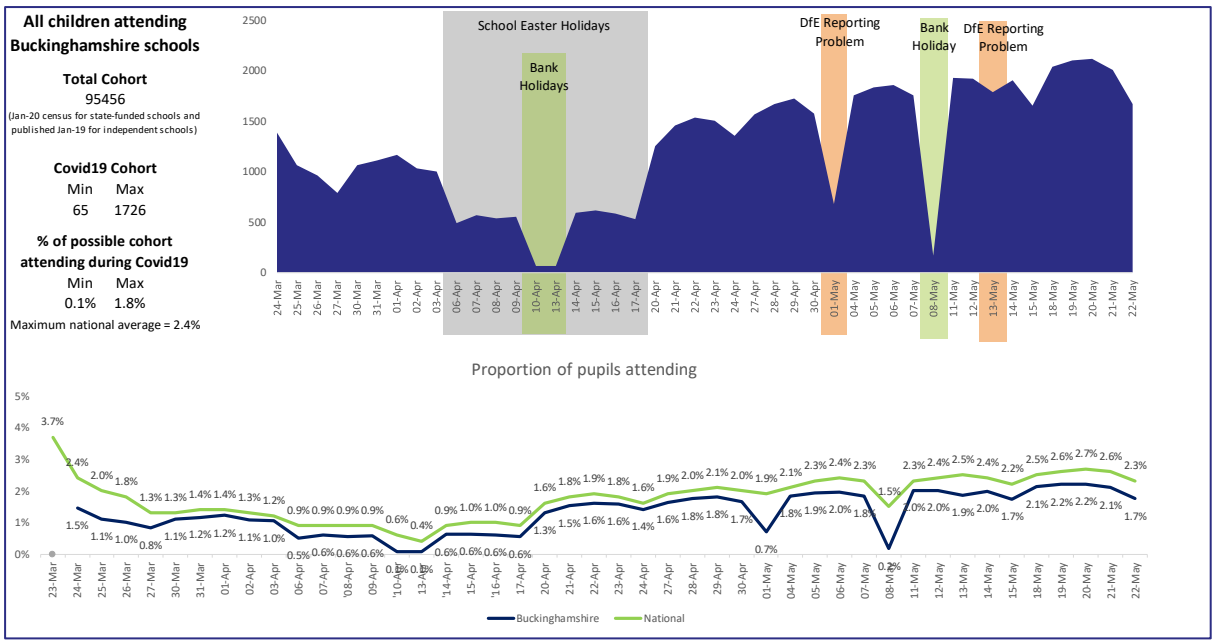
School Attendance Summary

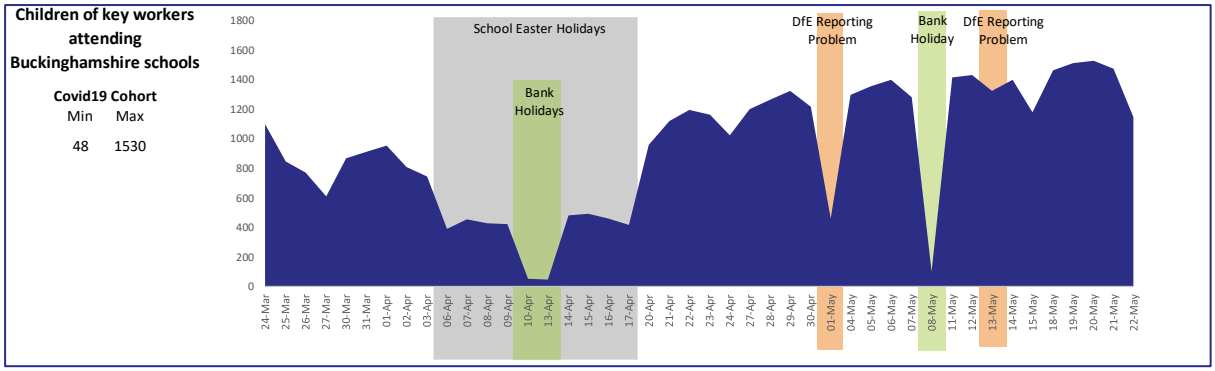
1.19 In the period since the partial closure of schools on the 24 March 2020, schools have been sending attendance data to the Department for Education. This has been made available through a daily download to Local Authorities and has allowed us to track attendance of specific metrics. Please see the graphs below:



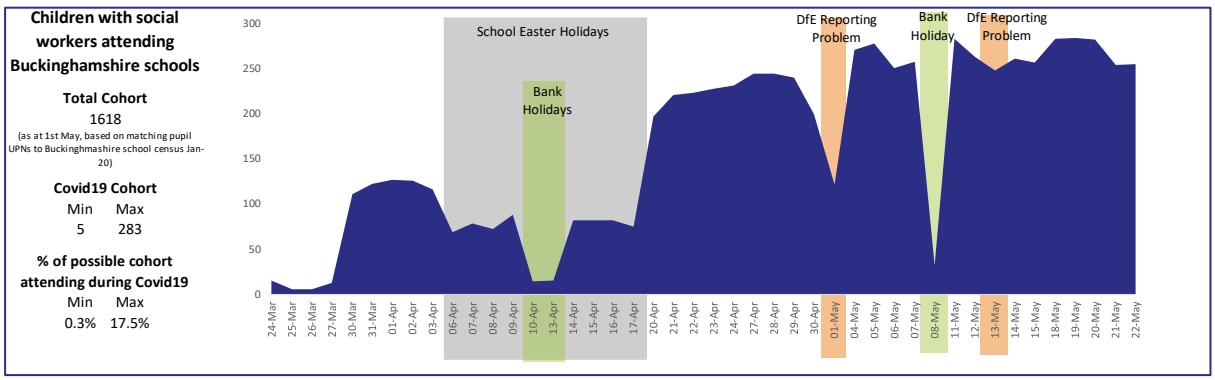
1.20 Schools in Buckinghamshire have shown three distinct (and expected) patterns of opening since the partial closure began. During term time there have been roughly 190 out of a total of 237 schools open each day, this figure fluctuates slightly depending on need and staff availability. The total number of schools above is inclusive of independent schools. The number fell to around 100 during the holidays as schools were mainly catering for pupils who were children of key workers and many parents had arranged leave during the Easter period anticipating that schools would be closed. A very small number of schools remained open across the bank holidays as there was a very low request from parents to take up the offer of childcare.

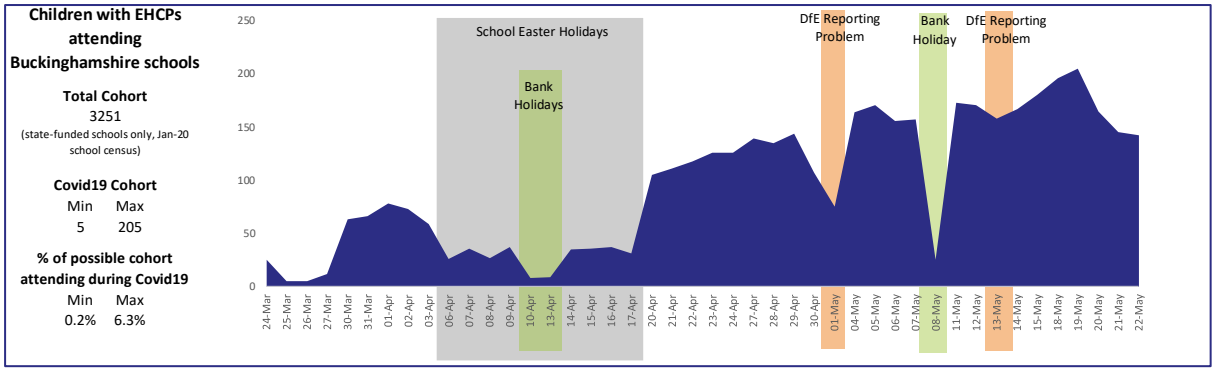
1.21 In looking at the overall number of children attending school during this period, there has been an overall gradual increase during 'normal' school weeks, this has largely been driven by the increase in vulnerable children and those with EHCPs returning to school over the longer period although there has also been a moderate increase in the use of schools to support children of key workers too.





1.22 There is a characteristic 'peak and trough' pattern to each week which is largely driven by key worker behaviour – many work part time and their working pattern would appear to exclude Mondays and Fridays as a group. This pattern is not prevalent when looking at other groups who are accessing school support during this period.





1.23 With both groups of vulnerable children, there has been a similar pattern demonstrated over the period since schools partially closed. Over time we have seen a steady increase in the number of pupils attending school provision (with an expected dip during the Easter break). This was an expected pattern for families of both groups as the challenge of maintaining lockdown with children with sometimes complex needs has not been sustainable in the long term.

1.24 The data for both groups shows a very low take up for the first few days of the lockdown. We know that this was due to the way that the DfE rounded establishment data and supressed any low values, meaning that many children were not included in the data release. We see this number increase markedly on 27 March 2020 when the DfE revised their methodology.

1.25 In light of the information, schools should expect to see a continued rise in the number of pupils from vulnerable groups attending and should consider a risk assessment for each child, in partnership with the family, to identify whether home or school is the safest place for the individual.