



Report to Cabinet

Date: 07-July-2020

Reference number: N/A

Title: Children's Social Care Response to Covid-19 and Improvement Plan Update

Relevant councillor(s): Cllr Mark Shaw, Cabinet Member for Children's Service

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Ward(s) affected: All

Recommendations: For Cabinet to note the service response to COVID-19 (C-19), report on the impact of these actions and to also provide an update on service improvement.

Reason for decision: Information only.

Executive Summary

- 1.1 The C-19 crisis is quite obviously a significant challenge to manage on all levels and at the time of writing is far from over. It has taken some adjusting to from a professional perspective. Good basic social work practice expects that children are seen, their physical and current circumstances assessed, and critical decisions are then made on the evidence gathered. The service responded to C-19 to ensure children and young people are kept as safe as possible within the limitations of what can be delivered in these circumstances.
- 1.2 Despite the significant challenges posed by C-19, the service reacted promptly and effectively to these unprecedented circumstances and has acted in a determined and focused way to continue our duty to protect children and young people. Our staff, without exception, have been nothing short of amazing and there is evidence that this crisis has enabled stronger relationships to be formed as a result of genuinely being all in this together.
- 1.3 The service is determined to continue to develop and improve, despite what is going on, and be in the best position possible to manage the potential challenges that lie ahead when something approaching normal life returns.

Content of report

- 1.4 Although C-19 has had, and continues to have, a significant impact on social work practice, not least in creating a challenging environment in which to protect children, the Senior Management Team (SMT) has continued to drive through service improvement actions with success. It has become clear, that whilst there are obvious challenges in conducting 'virtual' social work in the current circumstances, there are also opportunities to improve practice which this report will highlight.
- 1.5 The current situation in relation to service delivery is that the entire service is being delivered remotely and the majority of social work activity is based on virtual interactions with children, young people and their families. Home visits take place only when agreed by a member of SMT and these are triggered when there is no other way of being confident of the safety of children.
- 1.6 In order to reach the current position the service took a number of key decisions and actions to mitigate risk and ensure that close management oversight could be maintained. The key actions taken were:
 - a) 20 March 2020 a new case note type was created on LCS so that all virtual contacts could be tracked, and performance data reports run. This has allowed all virtual contacts to be isolated on the recording system and be audited.
 - b) 16 – 20 March 2020 Heads of Service started daily touchdowns with their staff using Microsoft Teams. These daily meetings managed and controlled the move to a 100% remote service. This included discussions on how to achieve virtual statutory meetings, virtual visits, virtual assessments and the basis on which home visits would be conducted.
 - c) 30 March – 1 April 2020 a set of minimum standards were created and issued to all staff highlighting the expectations in relation to a virtual visit, as well as the process for agreeing a home visit. In brief, the minimum standards require staff to request, be persuasive and secure agreement for a video interaction with the family/child/young person. Anything less than a video call requires immediate management oversight and decision making.
 - d) From 30 March all home visits require Head of Service permission. Social workers attending family homes must have PPE on their person and the social worker has the final decision on whether they enter the family home, based upon responses received from the family at the 'doorstep'.
- 1.7 The above actions enabled an immediate audit of activity levels to take place. The audit captured activity on randomly selected case files during April. The headlines from this activity were:
 - a) 163 cases were dip sampled over three days. In 96% of these cases there was clear evidence that a virtual contact had been attempted.
 - b) 61% of the 163 cases had a virtual contact recorded. The majority of these had been recorded within 48 hours of the contact being made.

- c) 32% of the cases had evidence of planning with key partners on monitoring and joint working arrangements.
- d) 42% of the cases had management oversight recorded in respect of C-19.

1.8 This audit activity was taken very early on in the C-19 crisis. It is positive that 96% of cases had clear evidence of an attempted contact and there was also appropriate management escalation on those cases where the family had not responded back to the social worker Where improvements could be made or where further clarity was required the allocated social worker was tasked to address these. Managers took immediate action to address these issues.

1.9 Further analysis of this cohort of 163 cases and in particular the follow up tasks on 17 April 2020 demonstrated that 82% of these tasks had been completed. Analysis of why this was not at a 100% highlighted the fact that in some instances the service user was not willing to participate in the way described. Where this has happened the supervising manager has given case direction and assessed the extent to which risk may have changed.

1.10 The Department for Education (DfE) return, made to all local authorities, has, at the time of writing, just been calculated. It is as follows:

Question	Children in need (including Care Leavers)	Children on a child protection plan	Children that are looked after
Total Number	2096	531	474
Number Reviewed	2025 (97%)	525 (99%)	470 (99%)
Number seen/contacted in last two weeks	1214 (58%)	486 (92%)	243 (51%)
Number seen/contacted in last four weeks	1756 (84%)	522 (98%)	405 (85%)

1.11 It should be noted that the service has used independent reviewing officers and staff from the Virtual School to make contact with our looked after children as soon as the current restrictions were put in place. As a service we wanted to check on the emotional well-being of our children and young people. We know from our records that this action enabled all school-age children who are looked after to have been contacted. We have also satisfied ourselves through indirect contact that those aged 4 years and under are being appropriately cared for.

- 1.12 There were also examples of good practice found including social workers recording their interpretation of the openness of the family, the risk indicators and next steps. There were a number of clear management instructions, setting out expectations and areas to cover in the next virtual visit and a clear focus on risk. A number of high quality Case Conferences and LAC Reviews had taken place virtually and these demonstrated an emerging and continuing pattern of improved participation in statutory meetings by young people.
- 1.13 Overall, it is the view of SMT that the service has made a good start in relation to C-19 work. There is, as always, more to do.

Management Oversight and Grip

- 1.14 The changes that have been made to the electronic recording system enable weekly reports to be run on which open cases have a virtual contact, when that contact last was and this is viewable by team. The weekly report is available to all managers, up to and including the Service Director and the Director of Children's Services. This enables the service to understand activity levels on a very regular basis and be able to take action where necessary. This performance data will be complimented by regular dip sampling to consider the quality of contacts. It should be noted that this activity is heavily focused on the quality of the 'contact' with children and young people and also the quality of the management oversight. Our audit reports are not solely focused on whether something has happened but whether it has happened to the required standard.
- 1.15 The Quality Assurance team from week beginning 20 April 2020 started a two-week rolling programme of audit activity. The focus is on virtual visits as described above. The second week focused on follow up activity and compliance of audit actions from week 1.
- 1.16 In addition, the weekly data set (from 20 April) reported on a number of additional key indicators. These include, in addition to unallocated cases, statutory timescales and information by team of the last virtual visit to all children on plans, looked after children and care leavers. This has allowed for SMT to quickly understand if any statutory case work is not receiving sufficient attention and take action to address deficits.
- 1.17 The headlines from the first report run on 20 April demonstrated that of the 3182 open cases, 2447 (77%) had a virtual contact recorded. The performance of different parts of the service is documented later on in this report. The service is already aware that the weakest level of compliance and depth to virtual contacts is with our care leavers.
- 1.18 The service is currently using IROs and other staff members across the directorate to contact care leavers in a coordinated piece of work with the two Children in Care

teams. This is assisting in getting hold of more of our young people, although it is clear persistence and commitment are required to get the right response.

1.19 Maintaining oversight of the service and additional risk that C-19 brings has been further enhanced by a series of daily and every other day virtual meetings. These include:

- a) Daily meetings chaired by the Director of Children's Services and senior managers in Education and Social Care.
- b) Daily meetings chaired by the Service Director with Heads of Service.
- c) Daily operational meetings involving Heads of Service, Team Managers, Assistant Team Managers and Social Workers by supervision group.
- d) Daily updates to CMT on activity across Children's Services.

1.20 The formal and informal feedback from staff about the impact of these meetings has been overwhelmingly positive. Outcomes from these meetings include clear evidence of expectations being understood across the service in relation to threats, challenges and opportunities. This includes achieving positive practical outcomes in relation to PPE, re-opening respite provision based on evidence, sharing good practice around increased participation and interactions with specific groups such as those with ASD and managing successfully challenging families. It is clear that there are benefits relating to managing a crisis, having a common purpose and working together that have brought the service together in ways that have not previously been achieved. Social work staff have reported back their positive experience in this respect and have made favourable comparisons in relation to what they understand is happening in other local authority areas. In a staff survey carried out during April over 80% of staff in Children's Services said they feel supported.

Partnership Work

1.21 The DCS has chaired daily meetings with head teacher representatives from across the whole range of schools in the county. These meetings have made a significant difference in terms of a joined up approach to sharing information, managing communication and enabling schools to continue to support children of key workers and vulnerable children. Children's social work staff and schools staff have been able to agree strategies on the best way of supporting vulnerable children to be in school and in managing the communication with families. A daily count of which children attend school and whether they are key worker children or vulnerable children with an allocated social worker has allowed the partnership to understand the picture across the whole county. We know that for vulnerable children with a social worker the numbers attending a school are a small proportion of the total.

1.22 These daily meetings have enabled Buckinghamshire to communicate with the DfE with a single voice and there have been a series of, initially daily and now alternate days, meetings with schools and social care officials from the DfE. These meetings

have enabled children's social care to clearly articulate the actions being taken in relation to service delivery during the C-19 crisis. The DfE is fully aware of our approach to virtual visits, the general frequency of home visits and our line management processes we have adopted to ensure, as much as possible, the service is safe.

- 1.23 The directorate took action and decisions on service delivery immediately after the national lockdown was announced and before any DfE guidance on this subject was published.
- 1.24 The DCS has also met with regional OFSTED colleagues on two occasions since the lockdown was announced. The purpose of these meetings was primarily to share the decisions that had been taken by the service in relation to delivery and seek the views of the inspectorate. The detail of how services are now being delivered and the risks inherent in doing virtual social work were shared with Ofsted. There was also a brief discussion on some of the challenges that will be present when it becomes possible to undertake direct work with families. Two main challenges were discussed: a probable increase in referrals when children and young people return to school and unreported abuse is disclosed and the fact the service will have a large number of partially complete assessments and plans to update. It was confirmed by OFSTED that they were in full support of our approach to this crisis and they did not suggest any additional measures to the ones we have already taken.

Service Activity Levels

- 1.25 The headline activity levels are as follows:
- a) Incidents of domestic abuse initially spiked. They are now below usual levels, however the general level of seriousness of each one is broadly higher. Strong partnership work with TVP colleagues has enabled commensurate outcomes to be achieved for victims and their families. This has included strong enforcement of civil orders and relocation of victims.
 - b) The service accommodated 15 children in the first two weeks of lockdown including a sibling group of 6. Decisive child protection activity has continued where it is required, and the service is conducting up to 6 home visits a day to ensure children are safe. The commitment from our staff has been at the highest possible level.
 - c) Our foster carers and our children's homes have continued to operate as normal with foster carers being willing to take new placements even when a child may have had symptoms of C-19.

Improvement Plan

- 1.26 Service delivery currently, because of C-19, is heavily focused upon regular and effective virtual visits to children, young people and their families. The main purpose of this work is to ensure vulnerable children are 'safe and well' and to establish whether decisive intervention is required. In the current circumstances, it is difficult

to evidence that plans are being progressed because some of the actions, for the most part, rely on non-remote contact. The same issue applies to assessments. These are two significant areas of the improvement plan that are effectively not being fully addressed currently. However, significant work is taking place in relation to management oversight, supervision and reflection in relation to virtual visits and there is emerging evidence of real strengths in terms of communication with young people and developing relationship based social work. Please see the latest version of the Improvement Plan in Appendix 1.

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) and Out of Hours Service (EDT)

- 1.27 The 'front door' has not unexpectedly experienced changes in demand during the C-19 period. Significant increases in help and advice work has impacted upon both teams, although the number of contacts that have led to a referral has fallen. The weekly performance data consistently indicates that contacts and referrals are progressed within the appropriate time scales. At the time of writing this report, there were just 3 contacts that had not been progressed within 72 hours. All three had an acceptable narrative as to why.
- 1.28 There are no current significant staffing issues in MASH or EDT. All the available evidence from data sets, feedback from other agencies and the quality of referrals into both Early Help and the Assessment Service indicate their performance remains strong. A particular strength that has emerged has been very effective joint working with colleagues from TVP in relation to domestic abuse. The quality of information sharing and joint responses to high risk incidents has been particularly effective.

Assessment Service

- 1.29 The weekly performance data at the time of writing showed good performance figures for assessments completed in 45 days (92%) and Section 47 enquiries on time (89%). The performance for Initial Child Protection Conferences on time was low with 3 out of 4 for that week being out of time. However, this was because of practical issues to do with holding a virtual conference and ensuring the family had the right technology to take part. None of these overdue ICPCs were more than 5 days out of time. Of the 437 open cases in the assessment service 381 (87%) had a virtual contact recorded as of 20 April. There are clear management actions on the remaining 56 cases as to how we may persuade families to engage with the service through a video interaction as set out in our minimum standards. Families can refuse and some tell us that they do not have smart phones with the right technology. Where this is the case risk analysis takes place and decisions are taken about organising a physical home visit.

Help and Protection

- 1.30 The emerging strengths of the H&P teams that were evident prior to C-19 remain in place. The management structure of each of the three teams is right and the post

holders perform well. For example, 85% of all reviews in this service, both CP and LAC are held on time and 88% of Section 47 enquiries are in time. At the time of writing there were 9 cases awaiting allocation. There is a plan for each one and these will be resolved in the next week. None have been unallocated longer than 5 days. As of 20 April 2020, of the 1347 open cases in Help and Protection 1219 (91%) had a virtual contact recorded. The majority of the 9% remaining had either had a physical visit or were new transfers into the team or involved families who have stated that they do not have the technology that allows a virtual contact.

- 1.31 Staffing levels remain stable and there are two empty seats across the whole service. The Court Team has continued to progress care proceedings and have been involved in the removal of two large sibling groups, one of six siblings and one of five. The whole service pulled together to ensure that these children had in house foster placements and that they went through this very difficult transition with the least amount of trauma possible. Social workers from this part of the service are completing approved home visits, on average 8 to 10 times a week. This reflects the level of risk in the service.

0 – 25 Disability and Portage Service

- 1.32 There has been a positive change within the Disability Service. Previously SMT had reported concerns about performance particularly in relation to vacancies. Of the 408 open cases in the Disability service 322 (79%) have a virtual contact recorded as at 20 April. There is a management action plan to ensure that as many virtual contacts as possible are completed and where families decline this, for whatever reason clear decisions are recorded as to why and what this means in terms of risk.

Children in Care and Care Leavers

- 1.33 The Children in Care teams still require further development to improve further. There has been progress during the course of this calendar year with emerging evidence of stronger levels of practice and performance more recently. A number of new managers have been appointed in both of the teams and it is anticipated that they will enable practice improvement to continue.
- 1.34 The performance data and case sampling indicate that the virtual contacts with looked after children has been high in frequency and effective in providing support. Social workers, staff from the virtual school, Independent Reviewing Officers as well as the Fostering team staff have all been involved in supporting our looked after children. For most children there has been a positive response to communicating with the service using electronic devices and video. Participation rates and extent of participation have increased and there will be a strong argument to maintaining some levels of this sort of communication indefinitely. The view of SMT is that the response to looked after children and the level of service they are now receiving is positive.

Early Help

- 1.35 There has been significant work completed, with still more to do, following the feedback from the Hampshire audit findings on Early Help. The key part of these findings focused upon the need to improve both the effectiveness and impact of management oversight.
- 1.36 The response to this feedback from staff at all levels in the Family Support Service has been positive and the HoS has been instrumental in putting in place a comprehensive action plan to drive forward the necessary improvements. To date, a number of important actions have been completed. These include training and coaching for managers, changes to the electronic recording system to allow better recording and reporting of management oversight and robust monitoring methods to measure improvements and impact of these improvements on outcomes for children. The approach to this area of improvement and the comprehensive nature of the plan to drive this forward provide confidence that improvement will be successful. This will ultimately be tested when colleagues in Hampshire report back the findings of a second audit of work. It is hoped that this will be by the end of August 2020, although this date is at risk because of current circumstances.

Recruitment

- 1.37 Recruitment activity has continued without too much disruption. The Community Care article and associated advertised vacancies did not create any new applicants or appointments. This was disappointing. However, permanent recruitment via a third party recruitment agency has continued. The current activity levels are as follows:
- a) Overseas recruitment. Four candidates are in the UK and have started work. They are working remotely and completing their induction. This is being reviewed by the Service Director with the Principal Social Worker on a fortnightly basis. Four remaining candidates will not be arriving in the UK until after the current crisis.
 - b) Three permanent starters began in May and two in June.
 - c) Two interviews for additional Assistant Team Manager candidates will be scheduled shortly. Both candidates are interested in Assessment Team roles and have been pre-screened and had informal interviews with the Service Director.

Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) staff

- 1.38 The first cohort of ASYE were being aligned to the teams that they will join when they graduate in September. The current crisis has disrupted this transition although this is being managed carefully. The next cohort was due to start in April; however, this had to be postponed. Initial work is underway with further education establishments to understand the various scenarios for current social work students and how they will finish their courses. This will give us an understanding of how best and when to start a new ASYE cohort.

1.39 A successful recruitment campaign has been completed in relation to Personal Advisors to work with Care Leavers. This followed after 5 individuals left the service having decided they did not want to participate in improvement work. There were 53 applicants for these posts and at the time of writing 5 offers have been made.

Other options considered

1.40 N/A

Legal and financial implications

1.41 N/A

Corporate implications

1.42 N/A

Consultation and communication

1.43 N/A

Next steps and review

1.44 N/A

Background papers

It is a legal requirement to make available background papers relied on to prepare a report and these should be listed at the end of the report (copies of background papers for executive decisions must be provided to democratic services). **Hyperlinks to papers published online should be used where possible. Where there are no background papers, insert none.**

Your questions and views (for key decisions)

If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the Democratic Services team. This can be done by telephone 01296 382343 or email democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk