

Education and Children's Social Care Overview and Scrutiny Committee



Date of meeting:	08 September 2021
Title of Report:	Covid19 Legacy – Children, Young People and Families Service
Lead Member:	Councillor David Downie
Lead Strategic Director:	Alison Botham (Director for Childrens Services)
Author:	Jean Kelly
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Your Reference:	CYPFSCovidlegacy080921
Key Decision:	No
Confidentiality:	Part I - Official

Purpose of Report

To share some key learning arising from our service response during the Covid19 pandemic. This will include:

1. A summary of our response as a children's social care service and the lessons learned.
2. The impact of Covid19 and lockdown on demand for children's social work services and capacity to meet this demand.
3. Next Steps

Summary of Service Response and lessons learned

The Covid-19 pandemic has challenged us all to work in new ways, adapt quickly to changing situations and rules, and review our priorities and principles.

Throughout the pandemic Children's Social Work Services have remained open, including our office base at Midland House. We worked to ensure the building was safe by installing a screen in reception very early on, ensuring all staff and visitors to the office used all required PPE and that we reduced the number of staff working in the building on any one day. The measures have been successful and we have not experienced any Covid-19 outbreaks as a result of colleagues being in the building. Many professional meetings are still being held virtually via MS Teams and we will continue this as part of our approach going forward as it saves time, maximises attendance and reduces the need for colleagues to spend time travelling where this is not necessary.

Other measures have included:

- a. Virtual and Hybrid ways of working

Home Visiting and face to face work. At the beginning of the pandemic we risk assessed every family we work with to ensure they received contact with us on a regular basis in line with our statutory duties. At times this meant virtual contact for a period of time. We resumed face to face contact as

soon as this was possible with all children in the summer of 2020. We have ensured that all families who are new to our service are seen face to face.

The benefits of virtual contact to support our visits and interventions with families have been continued and we now use this to supplement our contact and this has enhanced our ability to reach out and respond to families.

Court Proceedings. A number of young people and families open to our service are involved in court proceedings (care and adoption proceedings and criminal proceedings in the youth court). Initially, as court hearings were held virtually for most of lockdown, there were some delays in finalising some legal proceedings. We have worked very well with the judiciary to progress children's cases where there have been delays. The courts have now adopted a hybrid approach where some participants can attend court directly and others join hearings remotely.

Supporting children with a social worker to attend school: we have worked hard to support children to continue to attend school during periods of full lockdown. We were able to maintain a positive level of engagement throughout helping to mitigate the impact of any loss of educational support for this group of children. Working partnership between social work and EPS, the virtual school and schools were strengthened during this time to support children. We plan to continue this by linking social work managers with clusters of schools to support positive communication and problem solving together. This will commence during the autumn term in liaison with schools in the city.

b. Health Safety and Wellbeing

Testing and Vaccinations: All staff in Children's Social Care were offered vaccinations at the beginning of 2021 and by March most of our staff had received both doses. This supported their direct contact with families, offering everyone assurance that we were taking all measures to support safety.

Impact on stress and morale: This has been a significant issue for all practitioners and managers in our service. The wellbeing champions have offered regular advice and tips for colleagues to ensure they were taking breaks, taking leave, ensuring positive activities to support them as the pandemic progressed. This was well supported by a range of regular advice from the HR service. Daily meetings took place to support colleagues working from home and a rotation of staff coming into the office has support connectivity and support.

We have ensured that regular workplace risk assessments are undertaken with all staff members as part of their 1:1 meetings with their manager. These help understand how well colleagues are managing working from home as well generalised issues related to morale and wellbeing.

Working from home: Social work regularly requires practitioners and those supporting them to deal with significant and traumatic issues with families. During the pandemic they have sought to manage this while working from home where they can. However, this has had an impact on morale for some colleagues given the extended nature of lockdown. Practitioners require regular opportunities to seek advice, support and debrief from others. This can be much more difficult to achieve consistently when working virtually. Social workers are used to seeking out that support in an office experience to support their resilience, perspective and approach. We are very fortunate to have a significant number of newly qualified social work staff joining our service each year and it is crucial that they benefit from this advice, support and development. We expect that as we progress, we will be able to support colleagues to be office based 50% of the time while the rest of their time will be spent visiting families and working from home. We believe that this flexible approach with increased office based time will effectively support colleagues to deal with the impact (sometime significant) on practitioners.

Staffing issues: Turnover of social work staff has increased during the pandemic and this is understood to have happened for a number of reasons some of which are related to the impact of the pandemic. Reasons include pressure of work, opportunities in other local authorities or social work agencies such as fostering agencies, lifestyle choices and other personal reasons to ensure a different work-life balance. Aligned to this, however, our vacancy rate remains low at 1.7% and this compares favourably against other local authorities regionally.

We saw a considerable reduction in the level of long terms sickness during the first year of the pandemic. However this has begun to slowly increase in the past 2 months. We are monitoring this closely as we are aware that colleagues are tired following the impact of the pandemic including and the significant increase in demand on children's social work services.

c. Partnership networking

A regular Covid-19 response meeting with key partners has continued throughout the pandemic. This has supported information sharing about demand and capacity issues. This system wide forum has supported us to raise issues where there were gaps or challenges in our responses to families.

Impact of Covid19/Lockdown on demand for Children's Social Work Services

Demand for Children's Social Care Services during the pandemic has increased significantly. We are currently working with approximately 500 more children than we were at the beginning of the pandemic. This is a 25% increase in demand.

This has happened for a number of reasons, including:

- We have kept our office and services open throughout supporting families and other professionals to use our service during full and partial lockdowns.
- Some services offered a reduced service or closed during lockdown. Reduced services included offering virtual contact only or visiting in a crisis only. This gap led to an increase in families requiring a statutory response from the local authority.
- There was a rise in concerns related to domestic abuse, parental substance misuse and neglect.
- There was a rise in the number of older adolescents who required an emergency response due to family crisis and breakdown.

This increase in demand has required additional practitioner capacity. We have continued to recruit to all vacant posts. Other measures put in place include:

- Additional social work posts were agreed in October 2020 to address the demand issues at that time. This has been agreed on a permanent basis, adding 8.5 social workers to our staffing establishment across the service. However, this was not sufficient to respond to the level of demand we were experiencing.
- A further increase in social work capacity has recently been agreed and we have attracted social workers in a variety of ways. This includes individuals joining permanently or as locums.
- We have contracted an independent organisation called Innovate to provide a team of experienced social workers to work with us for 6 months. This a social work owned organisation and they come with a track record of supporting a range of local authorities across the country. The team joined us on 9th August and are integrating well with our service. They have taken on full caseloads and this is now impacting on the workloads of our practitioners in the referral and assessment service and our children's social work teams.

The 6 week school holiday has seen a reduction in referrals and we will continue to review demand on a weekly basis to evaluate the impact of this on our long term ability to meet demand with our establishment.

Children in Need: This is the group of children who require a supportive response from social work and other partner agencies to work preventatively so that concerns and risk do not escalate necessitating either child protection planning or a consideration about their safety within their family. This group of children and young people represent the biggest group of children open to our service. We are working with partners to ensure we intervene effectively supporting families to build their support network and understanding of the issues they face so that we can minimise the need for longer term intervention.

Currently, the social work teams undertaking the preventative work also work with children subject to child protection plans and those children and young people who are subject to care proceedings. As a result, at times of increased demand, this important preventative work cannot always be prioritised as practitioners and the service would want and expect.

As a result of this, we are looking to realign these social work teams to support dedicated child in need support work to be undertaken. We are trialling a dedicated child in need team with social workers and family support workers focussing on supportive and preventative interventions. This will support parents and children to strengthen their own problem solving skills, improve parenting approaches where needed/wanted and to help build their network of support so that they can seek help when they need it. This work is aimed at supporting families to help themselves and seek support when they need it, thus reducing the need for statutory service involvement. We are commencing this trial currently and will report on its progress. We expect to see a range of positive benefits from this, including:

- Reduction in repeat referrals
- Reduction in escalating risk requiring child protection planning or the need to consider care proceedings.
- Reduction in the overall number of children in need.

Children in Care: The number of children in care has grown significantly since the beginning the pandemic. This has included increases in older children and adolescents not previously known where family relationships have broken down. This has been linked to the challenges of lockdown restrictions and the way this has exacerbated existing challenges families were trying to manage without any formal support. As a result, we currently have 67 more children in care that at the beginning of the pandemic in 2020 (499 children).

This number does include 3 additional unaccompanied asylum seeking young people we have recently agreed to support in line with our duties as part of the national transfer scheme.

This increase has had an impact on placement sufficiency issues that were already a challenge. Ideally we place children in local placements including foster care, residential placements that we block purchase from a commissioned provider and supported accommodation options for young people over the age of 16 years of age.

We have increased our local capacity to support young people by working with local providers to increase access to local placements. We are working to increase our in house fostering provision.

Many children in residential care need this provision for a short or medium timeframe to support them and prepare them for living within a family setting. We regularly review these children's care plans to support transition in a planned and supported way. During the pandemic, we have had to place some

children in residential care as there have been insufficient foster placements to meet their needs. We have reduced this number by 7 children in the past month due to a focused piece of work to identify appropriate family based placements or by supporting them to be reunified with immediate or extended family members where this is assessed as in their best interest. Our Adolescent Support Team undertake this work to support reunification.

We continue to monitor this closely in order to ensure we are supporting children in our care for only the time they need this care and in the right placement arrangement to meet their needs.

Some Next Steps

1. Continue to use a blended approach to service delivery. This includes MS teams and we all now use this as a standard part of our delivery approach, particularly for professional meetings.
2. Trial our Child in Need only team to prioritise preventative work to reduce levels of need.
3. Ensure all staff have booster vaccinations as soon as this is available.
4. Ensure continued regular testing and use of PPE (in contact with families and in our office settings).
5. Continued monitoring and review of all placement decisions in respect of children in care. We are closely monitoring all residential placement decisions to ensure children are in the right placement to meet their needs. Planned moves to local fostering placements will be supported as soon as this meets each child's needs and foster placement capacity allows.
6. We are working to update our Recruitment and Retention Strategy to support our continued commitment to ensuring we are supporting colleagues we recruit to stay with Plymouth to develop their career through meaningful training, support and progression pathways.

Recommendations and Reasons

For information

Alternative options considered and rejected

Report for information and discussion

Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or the Plymouth Plan

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Implications for the Medium Term Financial Plan and Resource Implications:

Increased demand has had an impact on resources with the additional costs reflected in the 2021/22 outturn forecast and 2022/23 MTFP.

Carbon Footprint (Environmental) Implications:

During the pandemic changes to the ways we are working has resulted in a reduction in our carbon footprint in a number of ways, including less use of cars to travel to the office due to working from home arrangements. We have also reduced the use of photocopying and other paper-based resources.

Other Implications: e.g. Health and Safety, Risk Management, Child Poverty:

** When considering these proposals members have a responsibility to ensure they give due regard to the Council's duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination and promote good relations between people who share protected characteristics under the Equalities Act and those who do not.*

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Appendices

*Add rows as required to box below

Ref.	Title of Appendix	Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable) <i>If some/all of the information is confidential, you must indicate why it is not for publication by virtue of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by ticking the relevant box.</i>						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A	Briefing report title							
B	Equalities Impact Assessment (if applicable)							

Background papers:

*Add rows as required to box below

Please list all unpublished, background papers relevant to the decision in the table below. Background papers are unpublished works, relied on to a material extent in preparing the report, which disclose facts or matters on which the report or an important part of the work is based.

Title of any background paper(s)	Exemption Paragraph Number (if applicable) <i>If some/all of the information is confidential, you must indicate why it is not for publication by virtue of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972 by ticking the relevant box.</i>						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Sign off:

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Originating Senior Leadership Team member: Click here to enter text.											
Please confirm the Strategic Director(s) has agreed the report? Yes – Alison Botham Date agreed: 26/08/2021											
Cabinet Member approval: Yes – Cllr Dave Downie Date approved: 26/08/2021											