

Children's Services response to Covid-19

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This paper provides an overview of the key changes made to the Children's Services operating model in response to Covid-19 in response to challenges within our community, and how we will implement this learning going forward.

Initial Challenges under Covid-19

Overnight Covid challenged our operating model within Children' Services, increasing family pressures, financial insecurity and impacting on our local workforce and partner availability, making children more vulnerable to hidden and long-term harm.

Our statutory duties require the delivery of a casework service model, involving frequent visits by social workers to families in their home settings. This direct work to address safeguarding concerns requires social workers to site a child in their home. Practitioners also work jointly through a number of multi-agency partnerships with health, schools and the police in line with our model of systemic practice, recognising that everyone in contact with a child is responsible for ensuring their wellbeing is prioritised.

Due to the enforced lockdown, effective from 23rd March 2020, we were no longer able to complete all welfare checks on children in their homes, and as children were no longer attending school and other health settings we could not rely on intelligence from other professionals. A drop in our referral rates also indicated there was a risk of unseen safeguarding concerns. Additionally, vulnerable families accessing our early help offer were unable to receive visits from family practitioners, increasing the risk of families becoming overloaded and requiring more intensive services.

The impact on the education sector was vast, requiring a total redesign of their learning offer to facilitate online support, concerns over the risk of food poverty for children who would normally access free school meal provision, and high volumes of Government guidance which required translating and implementing. A move towards a virtual delivery of educational materials also led to concerns over equality of access to learning resources. Under new acts of parliament, the LA was also deemed responsible for coordinating all PVI, nursery, primary, academy, free school and independent schools in their civic/education response.

The majority of the Special Schools closed in the early lockdown period with Queensmill running a significantly reduced offer and Jack Tizard opening in June for a very limited number of children. To mitigate increased impact on families managing the risk of covid to themselves as carers and to children with more complex needs, the Stephen Wiltshire Centre remain open to deliver support to children and their families. This required all staff to be risk assessed and supported to be safe in work.

The EHCP service has been delivered fully remotely since March. The closure of schools and incremental reopening has resulted in wholesale impact on our delivery of Special Educational needs provision as the Secretary of State issued notice to

amend the SEN Regulations under the Coronavirus Act – this allows for the LA to use reasonable endeavours to ensure that needs are met. This also introduced a requirement to risk assess every child with an EHCP to identify the impact of changes and measures to be put in place to ensure needs can be met.

In line with the closure of education settings, all children's centres were required to close. This meant that many families were unable to access the support services they were used to, and increased feelings of isolation.

Within our SEND cohort, in March all full-time children in our children's home, The Haven, became ill, resulting in the 1 child with split placement having to remain at Qhouse. Through close working with our Director of Public Health, systems and processes were put in place to ensure staff and children were protected. The Haven was the first LBHF outbreak, and we have modelled much of our understanding of management of outbreaks on this.

Our co-production and local offer services has also run wholly virtually. While this has been very successful, we have during this time brought on board our 2 inclusive apprentices who have had to start their roles in LBHF virtually. During this period there has been a high volume of DFE guidance and information to disseminate to parent groups which has been supported through the Local Offer Team. However, supported internships have been disrupted as placements have been impacted by lockdown.

Children's Services Response

Staff have shown an incredible resilience with more than 90% consistently available for work. With fewer than 15% of staff in the office at any one time, the service has effectively adapted to a revised operating framework and made some significant changes to practice.

From the outset, an early decision was made that there would be some children who would need to continue to be seen for safeguarding reasons. In line with this, all 1300+ open cases across Family Services, SEND and cases raised by education professionals were individually risk assessed and RAG rated. This information was also integrated into a dynamic vulnerable children data piece enabling continuous review of RAG ratings, visits, attendance at school provision open to vulnerable children, and digital inclusion.

Cases RAG rated as 'red', requiring continued home visits, were risk assessed prior to every visit to safeguard the wellbeing of our staff members and PPE was provided to all workers undertaking face to face visits. This equally applied to all early help family practitioners where cases were similarly identified as continuing to require visits. The Stephen Wiltshire Centre have co-ordinated this PPE distribution alongside supporting all families with agency and direct payments packages to access PPE. Fit-testing (for specialist PPE) for all services in LBHF across children's and adults was also co-ordinated from the Stephen Wiltshire Centre.

We set up virtual home visiting for all children and their families and provided digital equipment to some families to facilitate virtual visiting. Guidance has also been

developed on communicating with children during this period of high levels of virtual contact. We also developed a new virtual model for all virtual meetings including, Child Protection Conferences and LAC reviews. Our model has been highly regarded and used as an exemplar by DfE, and guidance of undertaking CP case conferences has been shared with West London colleagues.

For cases requiring a lighter touch support model within the early help cohort, Family Support established a new service called 'Time to Connect' that allowed a family to ask someone to call them at a time that suited them where they could talk through what was causing tension or worry.

A minimum of fortnightly contact has been maintained with the LAC cohort from either their social work team or the virtual school. We decided not to make non-emergency placement moves of children in care and care leavers who were ready for a placement step down, to ensure we maximised their stability and support during lockdown. Additionally, the Fostering service has continued to assess prospective new carers and operate a full support service to existing foster carers and connected persons carers. We have extended the approvals for our foster carers to increase availability and provided PPE to all foster carers.

Despite managing a local outbreak within The Haven, staff resilience and commitment to the children has been incredible. Staff have continued to come to work for 3 weeks when they believed the children all had Covid-19, staff sickness has been low, and no one has experienced severe symptoms. Increased staffing was made available, full PPE worn at all times and building work undertaken to create improved infection control facilities. During this period, all contact and external visitors were ceased with virtual methods successfully put in place for children to continue to see their families and professional networks. Throughout this period The Haven was well supported by schools, particularly Jack Tizard school.

Within two weeks, Family Support established a Virtual Family Centre that had daily live sessions streamed on Facebook, daily activities and story times uploaded, advice and support, an overloaded toolbox, access to Time to Connect, counselling and educational materials for home-schooling to support families no longer able to access support through Children's Centres.

Development of a LA emergency education plan was a collaborative effort by the key education advisers, SEND, social services and commissioning colleagues. Though all special and secondary academies closed in the first week of the lockdown period, the majority of primary schools, especially the community schools, remained open to key workers and vulnerable children. With the support of the education team, the remaining primary schools opened up to larger group of key workers. Vulnerable children who did not attend education provision were contacted by social workers at home, facilitated through the shared dataset of vulnerable children.

Over the next three months there were 193 individual guidance documents aimed at education settings, this needed interpreting and translating into LA guidance and action. Schools needed to risk assess for wider opening and individual staff risk assessments. The schools initially maintained the 2m distancing rules, then the 1

plus and now the whole year bubbles (up to 300 in secondary) and between 30 – 120 in primary. Distancing was difficult to observe in EY settings. There was confusion over the use of PPE in schools and special schools needed further support to interpret the DFE guidance. There was increased need for Easter and half term cover for key workers and third sector partners were asked to support the delivery plan.

In recognition of the lack of open education provision, a 6-day per week offer has been available at the Stephen Wiltshire Centre since March, offering sessions on site to children whose schools are closed. The Stephen Wiltshire Duty hours have also been extended to provide advice and support to all parents of disabled children in Hammersmith and Fulham.

Additionally, the Play Association have extended their day-care offer to 6-days per week to provide support to children and young adults who were not able to attend school or adult day-care offer. Further support measures have been put in place including an increase in home support packages through Direct payments and agency support agreed as required, and frequent contact with families by lead professionals. All cases have been RAG rated, and priority access to sessions given to most vulnerable children and families.

The EHCP Service, SENCOs and Education Team have continued to work closely throughout the risk assess and support schools and families to ensure that virtual learning, advice and support is in place. 88% of primary phased transfers were completed by February 15th deadline and 66% of the secondary transfers by the 31st March deadline. Work is now underway to ensure that children transition into their next education phase. Transition is always challenging and has required considerable additional support this year. Virtual annual reviews have been successful, supporting increased attendance of key professionals.

Co-production of the Local Offer has continued, facilitated through weekly zoom sessions with parents and a range of professional attendees including paediatricians, EHCP service, Educational Psychologists, Short Breaks service, transitions etc. Sessions have been very well attended with a much wider group of parents that would historically have attended the coffee mornings. Issues raised by parents have been tracked and responded to wherever possible to ensure that thematic and individual concerns are addressed.

A redesign of pathways to employment roles is underway to ensure that we have capacity to deliver independent travel training to deliver against travel care priorities and improve outcomes for young people.

Future Challenges

- Ensuring that we meet our statutory responsibilities while we continue to support staff to work in line with health and safety requirements.
- Development of a new operational delivery of a part virtual, part office-based service.

- Providing reduced office space, but sufficient to allow people to feel part of a team & have the opportunity to have support & learning from colleagues
- Potential for increased activity rates as more services return to pre Covid working arrangements.
- Additional cost pressures for the Local Authority if we seek a significant increase in the number of children requiring care.
- The popularity of the virtual family centre means that we are having to put dedicated staff to work on it. Our Children's Centre services are being redesigned so that we can relaunch and expanded service, delivered across more sites, from September.
- Space – full return to school and social distancing will there be enough space in schools?
- Teacher & support staff resilience - % of staff shielding and BAME disproportionality impact, so schools need to be supported on constantly reviewing their individual & school risk assessments
- Parent/carer confidence in returning children to school
- Staff wellbeing and HT resilience
- Co-ordination of new responsibilities tutoring, catch-up and student mental health
- Recovery curriculum and expectations to offer full curriculum
- Re stating assessment and OFSTED April 2021
- SEND responsibilities
- Business model /resilience of PVI sector
- Balancing support for the recovery curriculum and standards monitoring
- Managing expectations with the ten secondary academies without a dedicated secondary post
- Brokering access to additional space/outdoor learning
- Building the comms profile with wider community
- Integrating additional support for schools to manage wider SEND and inclusion including home support for online learning and therapies
- EY sufficiency as the sector has contracted in C19 era
- Move to blended learning model and ensuring parity of access to quality provision
- Further developing the Learning Partnership to build peer to peer support and system improvement
- Implementing the track & trace /local lockdown plan if required
- Maintaining standards and high profile during C19 period and fiscal challenge

- Ongoing risk of further outbreaks within our children's home. It remains unclear whether the children did have Covid-19 so the risk remains high for future outbreaks.
- Impact of Test, Track and Trace is an ongoing risk to staffing levels.
- Staff have worked at an intense level for the last 4 months, we are mindful of staff wellbeing and burn out.
- Ongoing impact of return to school for children with complex needs.
- Impact of social distancing on limited space in the centre and all of our facilities.
- Risk of families becoming exhausted as a result of relentless ongoing impact.
- Increased levels of support may be ongoing, the Short Breaks budget is budgeted assuming children are at school full time, there will be increased budget pressures.
- Return to school in September remains a challenge for all schools, returning children who require higher levels of support, struggle to socially distance etc will be a further challenge.
- Parental confidence in schools to keep children safe in relation to Covid remains an ongoing challenge.
- Virtual education where schools cannot be fully open is challenging for many children, for those with SEN there are additional layers of complexity.
- Parents remain anxious about return to school and the Local Offer team will continue to support access to the SEND service to ensure concerns are addressed.
- As part of Recovery there will continue to be join up between SEND, the Economy and Social Care in driving forwards the employment agenda, given the likely economic impact of Covid this joined up approach will be required to ensure that those with SEND are not left behind.

Road to Recovery

In maintaining the propriety to safeguard and promote children's welfare and wellbeing, service design and improvement post-covid will be driven by integrated business intelligence, finance and performance data. We will harness the energy, creativity and new collaborations formed through covid as part of a new delivery model, underpinned by a resilient, adaptive, highly skilled and stable children's workforce sustained through transition and change.

Our early help offer will focus on ensuring families receive the right help, at the right time, in the right place and at the right cost. We will develop a targeted offer to vulnerable youth to promote diversion and access and will tackle disproportionality focusing particularly on our YOS cohort, school attendance and late entrants into care. This will be supported by improved inclusion for all children in mainstream provision initiated through an immediate school's recovery, rebuild and redesign plan of the physical, ecological and academic offer. We will support more children and

young people to remain at home and maximise transition pathways for complex young people to adult and housing services.

On the following pages you can find briefing notes from each service covering their response to covid:

- Family Services
- Education
- SEND
- Commissioning
- Family Support