

Children's Services response to Covid-19: **Family Support**

Report Author: Peter Watt

This paper provides a brief overview of the key changes made to the Family Support operating model in response to Covid-19 in response to challenges within our community, and how we will implement this learning going forward.

Early Help

Initial Challenges under Covid-19

Difficulty undertaking visits to families due to the limitations of the lockdown. At the heart of our Early Help offer is support for families so that they do not need to access statutory services. Lockdown meant that many families were at risk of becoming overloaded and therefore requiring more intensive services.

Response

The most vulnerable families were identified, and face-face visits continued (with PPE) throughout – practitioners were video calling families in advance to explain the steps being taken to stay Covid safe. Most visits however were 'virtual' using zoom, WhatsApp, Teams and FaceTime. Practitioners ran sessions where they shared what worked best with virtual visits and lessons were learnt in how to build rapport when you have only met online, undertaking assessments and holding Team Around the Family (TAF) meetings that were engaging.

There were a cohort of families though who were identified as requiring a lighter touch support. This was due to the stresses of lockdown causing understandable tensions at home that we wanted to deescalate. We therefore 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. This service was also signposted by Hammersmith CAN.

Future Challenges

Getting the right balance of virtual and face-face visits will be key. There are clear efficiencies with virtual visits, and we will not simply revert to entirely face-face. But at the same time there are limitations in terms of virtual visits. We are currently undertaking some research with families and practitioners to support our service redesign.

Childrens Centres

Initial Challenges under Covid-19

Once Schools were closed, Childrens Centres were closed as well. This meant that we had no option for families to access the support that they were used to. And this, at a time, when they were facing a long period of isolation.

Response

Within two weeks we 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. We added in weekly wellbeing sessions for families and evening sessions for parents a young Mums support group and a drop-in session for new Mums. There is a daily timetable of activities and additionally, all the material can be accessed whenever people want. We used paid-for social media to promote the service to local families and also to give public health messages on issues like vaccinations.

When we were able to reopen two Childrens Centres so that families that were identified as requiring support could be invited to attend sessions. This has proved very successful for families who would otherwise be very isolated.

Future Challenges

The popularity of the virtual family centre means that we are having to put dedicated staff to work on it. Our Childrens Centre services are being redesigned so that we can relaunch and expanded service, delivered across more sites, from September.