



Report to Children and Young People's Scrutiny Committee

Impact of Coronavirus on Children's Services

July 2020

Background

Our children and families have experienced the swift and extensive impact of Covid on their daily lives, both the direct experience of Covid and the lockdown, but also the experience of living through the uncertainty of this unprecedented situation. This will include impact on emotional, social and physical wellbeing as well as the impact due to reduced service availability and protective contacts during lockdown.

It has been vital to maintain robust and good quality services for our children and families at this time of unprecedented challenge for them. With a national focus on keeping vulnerable children visible to services, the Department for Education guidance has been clear that it remains the responsibility of local authorities to meet their key statutory responsibilities for the welfare of children and families. These responsibilities include safeguarding children, although recognising the difficulties in seeing children a small number of limited adjustments have been provided for in national guidance (see flexibilities below).

Action Undertaken

Our priority under Covid has been safeguarding and protecting the welfare of children and young people. National guidance and public health guidance has been adhered to. The Department for Education has published a significant range of guidance throughout the period and we have ensured that we have understood and responded accordingly. We have sought to ensure that we understand risk and prioritise our work to reflect this.

As lockdown approached the service prioritised all children for whom we had the greatest concerns for ongoing face to face visits. All families receiving early help or social work support have been risk-assessed to determine the level of support required (face-to-face or via phone/video conference). Children and families supported by Children's Social Care have been receiving at least fortnightly contact and those children most in need of protection are seen more often in planned and unannounced visits to ensure they are safe. This level of visiting has been below normal requirements but for a period we wanted to ensure that children's needs were well understood and visible.

Nearly 2,500 individual risk assessments have been carried out since lockdown for children currently open to services:

- 354 were risk assessed as red
- 1334 were risk assessed as amber
- 783 were risk assessed as green

During May 2020, risk assessments were randomly dip sampled using a regional template and findings have been available to the Corporate Director and Portfolio Holder to provide assurance regarding the practice during this period.

We engaged more social work capacity from agencies as we approached lockdown, with additional resources being invested by the Council to make sure we had enough staff to keep children safe. There have been no significant issues that we could not manage in terms of staff absence due to illness, although a number of staff are shielded or isolating at different points, many staff are working remotely. Staff usually deployed within universal services, including youth workers and Children's Centre workers, have worked flexibly to support vulnerable children, young people and families to ensure that critical services continue. Some of our youth workers have been trained to work in our children's homes to help fill any gaps. Family support staff have continued to visit children who may be vulnerable and robust arrangements are in place to monitor staffing levels and agree where necessary the emergency deployment of staff.

Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub and Duty

There was initially a significant decrease in multi-agency safeguarding hub enquiries and resulting social work assessments in our duty service. The number of referrals to the multi-agency safeguarding hub reduced during the lockdown, but referrals gradually increased and are now largely restored to pre-Covid levels. However, this short period of decrease in referrals has not resulted in major changes to the number of children supported through child protection plans. Just before lockdown we had a significant rise in the number of children coming into care and an increase in children on child protection plans. The duty service is working as usual to keep children safe. They are visiting homes and working with the police where necessary, providing help and support. A member of the duty team spoke on local and national radio to share the message that we have social workers in Nottingham City ready and waiting to help. Work is underway to prepare for a possible increase in referrals following the end of lockdown, although with a slow return of children to schools we have seen referrals increasing. We are working with our education colleagues to actively manage new concerns as children return to school.

Government has acknowledged that measures introduced to tackle Covid, such as requirements to stay at home, are particularly problematic for people at risk of harm from others in the home setting. We have worked closely with partners to monitor and respond to domestic violence and abuse (DVA). Risks associated with domestic abuse are a frequent cause of referrals to social care. Whilst there has been a reduction in formally recorded crimes and some reduction in referrals related to DVA, levels of referrals are now almost restored to pre-Covid levels. We are not as high as we would normally be at in the run up to school holidays, but we are at pre Covid levels. It is a concern that it is likely that there will be hidden instances of DVA, which will have been impacting on children and young people during lockdown.

Independent Reviewing Services

All independent reviewing services for Child Protection and Children in Care conferences and reviews are now taking place via video link (Microsoft Teams), telephone calls and written reports (email). Parents/Carers/Young people are included in these meetings. Every effort is made by the child protection chairs and IRO's to involve parents/carers in the child protection conference/Child in care process. This is on Microsoft Teams where possible. We have parents and young people on speaker phone during reviews and they are also spoken to by the chairs before and after the review. Chairs make sure they have understood everything discussed and have been able to participate fully in the plan, to work with them to keep their children safe.

Early Help Services and CAMHS Services have developed materials online for children and families to use and for staff supporting families who may be under stress. Throughout the Covid period, we have maintained our commitment to the early intervention targets set out in the current Council plan. Early Help (Children's Centre) colleagues have been delivering materials and contacting families identified as most in need of Early Intervention. We have continued to meet the needs of families experiencing increased behaviour struggles, increased relationship and domestic abuse concerns through the development of and delivery of virtual evidence-based programmes. We have been supporting families who do not have the resources to promote child development and learning at home through the delivery of Peep learning resource packs.

Youth and Play Services have continued to provide essential targeted support in a virtual way to divert young people from risk taking behaviour. Provision is linked to the Serious Youth Violence and Exploitation offer, with a focus on engaging young people at risk of exploitation or anti-social behaviour. Our Youth and Play colleagues have had regular contact with 278 young people who usually attend sessions and have been identified as the most vulnerable. They have also been delivering activity materials, and engaging young people in the message of 'stay at home' through virtual mediums like regular telephone calls.

Respite services

Short breaks are provided by Whole Life Disability. The regular short breaks service was largely paused during this period, delivered instead as a reduced support service. The respite provide by children's residential services at Crocus Fields have also continued in a scaled down version of support visits rather than overnight stays, as below. Short breaks and Crocus Fields service worked together to avoid duplication and offer support where most needed with some sitting service, shopping collection etc.

Fostering

The impact of Covid has been quite diverse for children and foster carers. Some have found that the time at home as a family has allowed the children and young people to form strong attachments with their foster carers. However, for others this time has been one of real challenge, either due to the vulnerability of the carers or the difficulty the young person has had in responding to the lockdown (for example where behavior has become more difficult to manage). Due to some of these difficulties there has been an increase in breakdowns in foster placements. Our foster carers have been incredibly creative, caring and resilient. They deserve recognition for their commitment to our children and young people in these challenging circumstances.

Adoption

Nottingham City is part of the East Midlands Regional Adoption Agency (EMRAA), with Nottinghamshire County Council managing the provision of adoptive homes, homefinding and post adoption support. They have continued to provide all of these services during lockdown, but with careful risk assessed plans to support introductions for new placements. As with some of our foster carers, many adoptive families have found this period of lockdown and often home working, a good bonding opportunity. We have not seen any adverse impacts, other than delays in final orders at court. The courts are working to resume hearings at the frequency of pre Covid level but this will still take some time. The courts have had to delay or postpone hearings if parents were not able to take part in a meaningful way.

Residential Children's Homes have continued to operate as far as possible as family settings responding to the Covid-19 crisis, supporting young people to stay safe, to maintain their wellbeing and to maintain their learning. Staff sickness and shielding has been high in this service, but staffing has been maintained by redeploying colleagues from Play and Youth into our children's homes. In one home, children and staff needed to isolate due to potential Covid-19.

Service Closures

The following service closures were authorised in order to maintain health and safety and to meet government guidance:

- Crocus Fields: building-based overnight respite service closed, alternative support/ outreach provided where possible and appropriate
- Children's Centres: most centres closed, targeted non-building based outreach provided. A few centres remained open, but limited on to access to health clinics delivered on sites.
- Contact: contact centres closed and building-based contact reduced to a minimum, virtual contact used where possible and appropriate. Where exceptional.
- Play and Youth: building-based and group service closed, targeted engagement maintained according to prioritised need in liaison with Youth Justice Service.

Working with schools and education providers

There has been an important focus on the education offer to vulnerable children, recognising the importance of learning and the protective benefit of school attendance in the protection and wellbeing of children.

Children's services have worked with the Education team and with schools to ensure a closely coordinated response to vulnerable children as defined in the guidance – children and young people with a social worker and those with special educational needs and disabilities – alongside children who may not meet the guidance but about whom we are concerned. This has been underpinned by a shared understanding of individual risk assessments and agreed joint work to support and protect the child.

Safeguarding Partnership

The Nottingham City Safeguarding Children's Partnership has increased its schedule of partnership meetings to provide robust oversight of the changes to our system to support children and families in Nottingham under Covid-19 and that we have identified and addressed risks and actively shared our learning and good practice.

Regional Connections

We have worked closely with other East Midlands Councils to make sure that we are all following best practice, sharing learning and checking the local need and response against what other councils are seeing in the region. We have used shared regional approaches to quality assure practice in this difficult time.

Temporary Regulatory Flexibilities

On 23 April 2020, the Department for Education (DfE) introduced a series of temporary regulatory flexibilities for local authorities and children's social care providers. They have made no changes to primary legislation and the vast majority of secondary legislation remains unchanged. The Regulations will expire on 25 September unless

there is a clear need to extend them. The DfE are monitoring the use of the Regulations through a range of channels including the Department's regional teams.

The Children Integrated Services Directorate have not enacted all of the available easements. Instead, the expectation is that it is "business as usual" and the easements considered as required, dependent on service capacity and levels of risk experienced within services. We have used some of the process changes available in how medicals for foster carers are arranged for example, which is now undertaken on the basis of self-declaration given that GPs are not seeing people face-face unless there is urgent need. We have kept a list of all of those carers where we have used this approach and will revisit these assessments when circumstances allow. We are also sending carers first reviews straight to the ADM rather than through panel and to ADM, unless there are concerns raised. Once again this will be kept under review.

The use of flexibilities has been subject to review with the Portfolio Holder during July. The Secretary of State must review the effectiveness of the amendments made by these Regulations during the period in which the amendments have effect.

The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 temporarily amends 10 sets of secondary legislation relating to children's social care to support services to manage the coronavirus outbreak. The changes are intended to support services to manage the increased pressure on children's social care and cases of staff and carer shortages arising from illness due to coronavirus.

A process for considering and determining the use of amendments was agreed at Corporate Leadership Team. This is led by the Director of Children's Services in consultation with the lead member for children's services, the Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People and with the advice of the Director for Children's Integrated Services and her senior leadership team.

Our Colleagues

Covid has of course impacted our colleagues in their home lives as it has for all of us, and we have sought to recognise individual need and to work with colleagues to support them at this time. It has been particularly important that we understand disproportionate impact of Covid and use a risk assessment process with colleagues to agree how to support them (including specifically in relation to our BAME colleagues).

The majority of colleagues have been working from home much of the time, even if they are visiting children and families. The importance of team working in children's social work is well-established in research literature and efforts have been made to mitigate the risk of losing the connection of being in the same office. We are actively considering how we enable teams to spend more of their working time together in a socially distanced way.

In the early stages of the pandemic, personal protective equipment (PPE) was a concern for children's social care due to an initial lack of clarity about the national guidance and concerns about access to necessary supplies.

Colleagues have also stepped into different roles to allow us to meet priorities. Our colleagues in children's social care deserve real commendation for their responsiveness

to the challenges of working in the pandemic and to their work to safeguard and support the wellbeing of some of our most vulnerable children and young people.

Risk

Child Protection Plan admissions were high in February and March 2020 resulting in the highest volume for a quarter during this financial year. The resultant number of children with a child protection plan in place has increased by 25% compared with the previous year. It is suspected that this increase can be explained by high profile cases and an Ofsted inspection as opposed to the resultant impact of Covid.

Higher child protection numbers often translate in to more children coming in to care too as with intervention and scrutiny more risks are often identified. The number of children in care has increased from 617 in April 19, to 653 at the end of March 20, and 677 as at 29th June. We have seen increased pressure on placement stability as a consequence of Covid. In some cases there is a direct impact, e.g. we had a placement breakdown where the carer was shielding and the child refused to comply with social distancing measures. In other cases increasingly challenging behaviour from the child has left carers feeling unable to manage placements.

There is a further financial consequence of the impact of Covid, which has compromised transitions for care leavers into their own accommodation. It should also be noted that Housing Aid have seen a significant increase in demand from single homeless households and in particular, an increase in the number of single individuals meeting the threshold for a statutory response and therefore requiring a social let. This is likely to impact on the time it takes to identify properties for young people post-18.

Next steps

As the pandemic progresses, we will continue to focus on recovery.

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