

Committee(s): Safeguarding Sub Committee – For information	Date(s): 24/06/2020
Subject: Children's Social Care Covid 19 Response: Guidance and Approach	Public
Report of: Andrew Carter, Director of Community & Children's Services	For Information
Report author: Rachel Green, Community & Children's Services	

This report outlines the response of the Children's Social Care Service in the Covid-19 period and the guidelines that have been followed to ensure staff and client wellbeing.

Summary

The Social Care and Early Help Service has adapted quickly to meet the new and emerging needs of children and families in the City of London. This report sets out the response of the service and the guidance on social work practice that has shaped this response.

The initial phase of the work was to ensure that children could access their learning through provision of dongles, laptops and ipads, and by ensuring weekly contact with all children and families for support, advice and guidance. As the pandemic has continued, and some families have faced additional financial hardship with redundancy and the loss of jobs in the 'gig' economy, work has been supporting with access to financial advice, emergency funds and access to benefits. Work has also involved supporting with planning timetables for the home, ideas on play, listening to worries and fears, and undertaking direct work with children virtually.

Visits to children and family have been conducted via a mix of face to face and virtual methods over the period, in line with newly established guidance on safety and the use of PPE. Staff have been present in the Guildhall on a rota basis, and have been providing a full duty service in office hours throughout this Covid-19 period.

Recommendation(s)

Members are asked to:

- Note the report.

Main Report

Background

Early Help

1. The Early Help Service is, as its name suggests, a service which provides help and support early, to ensure that need does not turn into risk, and to support families in a timely way before problems worsen. Therefore, according to the City of London COVID-19 response guidelines, all face-to-face visits ceased as these were not deemed essential.
2. As the database set up for Early Help was in progress, spreadsheets were used to track weekly visits, school/tuition attendance, and Covid symptoms in Early Help from the outset of lockdown in March 2020. This enabled a service overview, and assurance that young people were able to access their online education and were attending these classes in a timely fashion.
3. The Early Help Service had to adapt and challenge itself to continue to meet the needs of the local community and service users. The team worked from home virtually in ways that they had not done so previously. Despite some initial technical challenges, Early Help has been reactive, adaptable and flexible to help children & families during these uncertain times.
4. The direct work with families has been intensive, which has included weekly virtual home visiting and direct work sessions with children across a broad age range and cognitive abilities. There have been a range of success stories, which includes supporting children to access school, online educational resources and providing laptops and computers to our school age pupils.
5. The team have supported parents and families who have been experiencing financial hardship related to Covid-19, making referrals to the Square Mile Foodbank, providing supermarket vouchers and ensuring families are in receipt of free school meal entitlements. This has prevented food poverty for many. The team have been engaged in advice and signposting to families on welfare rights during this time and have made referrals to City Advice to help our parents access further support with employment rights, health and well-being information including help to complete new Universal Credit claims.
6. The children the service work with have enjoyed the work they have been completing with the Early Help Worker, who has been using social stories to help their understanding of Covid-19. Social story work has helped with the change in their routines and supported them to understand their situation and social distancing rules.
7. Systemic Family Therapy has continued to be offered to some families via Microsoft Teams and we have been pleased by the outcomes and shift to new positive behaviours. The feedback received from families during this time has all been very positive, with one family saying, "*many thanks for the FaceTime*

call, we are grateful for your care for our family, thanks for organising our Family Session this afternoon. It was a very useful session and we are grateful for having the opportunity to talk to you".

8. At the centre of Early Help intervention is the great work which is being undertaken collaboratively with colleagues in a range of service areas, especially with our commissioned partners and Health and Education colleagues. An audit report on the quality of virtual visits in Early Help evidences an exceptional level of work in this service.

Short Breaks

9. Children with a disability are entitled to short breaks, and this policy is available on the City of London's website. The purpose is to offer leisure opportunities to children that they might not otherwise be able to access. In lockdown, families have been faced with the challenge of keeping their child or young person entertained and occupied for longer and the daily routines have been thoroughly changed. Further, due to Covid-19, a number of children and young people have been unable to access their regular short breaks activities. This is due to a range of reasons, either because the short breaks provider is closed and or families are unable to spend direct payments/individual budget on the chosen activity.
10. The service decided to enable families to use their March-August Short Breaks payments on a range of resources. The service offered flexibility for the payments to include purchases on IT equipment, books, games, apps, toys such as outdoor play equipment, bikes, arts and craft materials. This flexibility was put in place to support the development, education and stimulation of children through play and creativity. Four families have so far bought IT equipment, including ipads and laptops that have enabled their children to access education and leisure activities. Two further families plan to buy IT equipment with these funds, having already access to a laptop for educational purposes.

Children's Social Care

Needs arising

11. There have been a number of themes arising for our service users during the Covid-19 pandemic which will be covered throughout this report.
12. There have been several academic papers that have been published during the Covid-19 lockdown focussing specifically on the markedly higher mortality risk from Covid-19 among Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups. This is particularly relevant for our service with consideration that the majority of our service users are from BAME groups. This has been a challenge for us not only when considering our service users health but also the wellbeing of our workers, over half of whom are BAME. This continues to be held in mind

as at the present time as the exact reasons for this increased risk and vulnerability from Covid-19 in BAME populations are not known.

13. The hypothesised contributing factors have been outlined and considered in practice. This has been in consultation with health partners at a strategic level and ensured that our service users and the professionals around them continue to communicate the most up to date Government advice regarding Covid-19. For example, the City of London raised what more could be done to support BAME children looked after in the pandemic with the City and Hackney Health Children Looked After (CLA) service review meeting. Research was discussed, and outcome was that CLA health nurses would write to every BAME CLA's GP to ask that vitamin D be prescribed/formally recommended. The evidence showed that vitamin D has a small but positive effect on reducing the effect of Covid-19 symptoms, it was noted by health professionals that our children are less at risk of Covid-19 by virtue of their age.
14. Covid-19 is a respiratory illness. Most of our service users have come to the attention of our service as Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). This has meant that they have been more likely than our indigenous population to have previously suffered or currently be suffering with Tuberculosis. A small number of our UASC, less than 5, were highlighted to our Children Looked After Health Team and review health assessments were brought forward and completed to address their specific tuberculosis related issues.
15. Newly arriving UASC have experienced long and arduous journeys, where health needs are not met, and more health needs arise. The City of London has infectious disease screening in place for new arrivals, and now with Covid-19 there is COVID testing and Child Looked After Health advice available to social workers. At the outset of the pandemic, fostering and semi-independent agencies were reluctant to accept any new UASCs given the health risks. As a result, the Children's Social Care Service, jointly with Adults Social Care and Homelessness Service, procured hotel spaces with support that enabled the placement of 16/17 year old UASCs in an emergency. This service has not needed to be used, as placements have been found that better meet young people's needs.

Education & isolation

16. It is well evidenced that loneliness is experienced at far greater levels by care leavers than the general population which could be increased further by the lock down. This may be linked to some of our service users sometimes finding it challenging to remain in their placements and follow Government guidance. We increased our contact to our care leavers to weekly initially and supplied technological devices and internet as detailed below to support with trying to reduce loneliness through increased social engagement. Some of our placement providers also put together timetables of activities for service users

they could engage in inside their placements, for instance BBQ's and movie nights.

17. We quickly identified that access to remote learning would be barrier to a number of our service users due to their circumstances.

18. There was a significant level of partnership working with schools and colleges to identify what support schools could offer in providing access to remote learning. In addition, they supported in preparing risk assessments for service users who were eligible to attend one of our two Hub provisions. These provisions offered children of a school age residing in the City, whose schools were closed or a long commute from their home, an opportunity to study in a school setting locally.

19. For those service users where education providers were unable to provide adequate tools for remote learning, we looked at how we could support. The below table details the number of service users that now have access to the below technological devices who previously did not following distribution by Children's Social Care which has supported with their education.

<u>Category</u>	<u>Laptops</u>	<u>4G internet</u>	<u>Tablets</u>
Child In Need	3	-	-
Child Protection	3	5	-
Looked After Child	11	-	-
Care Leaver	8	6	4

NB: this table is correct as of 05/06/20. It does not account for service users that have utilised their Short Breaks entitlements to purchase technology for entertainment and social engagement purposes during the lockdown which they have in turn utilised to engage in education. Nor does this account for those devices that were provided by education providers for service users.

20. The below table breaks down the number of service users that are either accessing education virtually or in person. Without the above detailed provision of technological tools, a number of these service users would not have been able to continue their studies.

<u>Category</u>	<u>Virtual attendance</u>	<u>Attending in person</u>
Child In Need	14	6
Child Protection	2	2
Looked After Child	19	-
Care Leaver	18	-

NB: this table is correct as of 31/05/20. This table does not account for school refusers, NEET or employed care leavers.

Social work support

21. A key component of our work is achieving positive change through direct work with service users while utilising systemic practice. The service quickly identified that with the Covid-19 pandemic practice would need to change significantly, that being from moving to an increased use virtual technology to support communication, and a reduction of face-to-face visiting to keep both service users and workers safe. Initially we were offering weekly virtual contact to service users utilising various technologies including Skype, Zoom, Whatsapp and telephone. Service user feedback was listened to and our contact levels amended from weekly on a case by case basis dependent on a combination of service user wishes and assessed safeguarding risk.
22. Every service user that is currently open to the service has been spoken with since the pandemic commenced to ensure that key Government health advice has been shared and they are clear on who they can contact for additional advice and support. This has been repeated and strengthened with contact by the participation officer and independent reviewing officers in the Quality Assurance and Safeguarding service, as well as keywork staff and foster carers where the children live. Where needed, health professionals have also been in contact to promote health safety and wellbeing.
23. The below table shows the latest visiting/contact data with service users within the last reporting week:

<u>Category</u>	<u>Virtual visits/contacts</u>	<u>Face to face visits</u>
Child In Need	27	2
Child Protection	3	2
Looked After Child	21	2
Care Leaver	34	1

NB: this table reflects visiting for the week ending 31/05/20.

Risk assessment & PPE

24. The Covid-19 guidance issued by the City of London sets out when and how a visit should be taken to service user(s), with full consideration of PPE, social distancing and travel.
25. In order to safeguard both service users and workers, the team have been utilising this guidance. Before considering a face-to-face visit, the risk assessment is completed, reviewed and authorised prior to visit by a manager within the team. The team have also utilised PPE when face to face visiting is required and have been utilising the City of London Corporation guidance regarding safe removal and disposal of this PPE.
26. For one family of four children supporting with Child In Need intervention, PPE has been creatively utilised to ensure a consistent service. The support for the family prior to and through the pandemic used a Family Support Worker in

addition to the social work support we provide. The funding for the Family Support Worker continued and extended for this COVID period and PPE was given to ensure that the family were able to continue to receive the face-to-face intervention that they required. This ensured that the family's needs continue to be met throughout the pandemic, and risk was contained.

Systemic support

27. During this exceptional time, we have benefitted from the ongoing support of our Consultant Systemic Psychotherapist, who has continued to be available virtually throughout the pandemic every Wednesday, offering the service a variety of different support including one-to-one systemic case consultations, monthly systemic case discussions and monthly team systemic group supervisions. This has supported the service to think creatively in how to engage service users virtually while also supporting team wellbeing and resilience.

Conclusion

28. The service has been proactive and responsive to child and family need. Staff have been well motivated and creative in their work with children and families in this new environment, with different needs arising. It is anticipated that there will be an increase in reporting of domestic abuse, as has been the national picture over this period, and that there will be more stressors on families as redundancies take place.

29. Service development work continues, alongside emergency response, to strengthen and continue our outstanding work with children and families.

Appendices

- Appendix 1 – City of London Guidance for Children's Social Care and Early Help

Rachel Green

Service Manager, People Department
Department of Community & Children's Services

T: 020 7332 3501

E: Rachel.Green@CityofLondon.gov.uk