

Meeting date: 13th January 2021

Report to: Children's Services, Education and Skills
Scrutiny Board

Subject/report title: Children's Safeguarding Arrangements and the Family Support Service

Report from: Frank McSheffrey – Assistant Director for Children, Young People and Families.

Report author/lead contact officer: Emma Lightfoot – Principal Social Worker



Wards affected:

- All Wards | Bickenhill | Blythe | Castle Bromwich | Chelmsley Wood |
 Dorridge/Hockley Heath | Elmdon | Kingshurst/Fordbridge | Knowle |
 Lyndon | Meriden | Olton | Shirley East | Shirley South |
 Shirley West | Silhill | Smith's Wood | St Alphege

Public/private report: Public

1. Purpose of Report

- 1.1 To appraise the Scrutiny board of the challenges and learning from the delivery of children's social care during the Covid-19 pandemic and the implications for staff wellbeing.

2. Decision(s) recommended

- 2.1 The Scrutiny Board is invited to discuss the report, consider any advice and comments it may have and offer its endorsement of the work undertaken by Children's Services during the Covid-19 pandemic including progress on our ILACS action plan.

3. Matters for Consideration

The Covid-19 pandemic has required us to review and adapt our operating model and introduce different ways of working which in turn created numerous challenges in service delivery and staff wellbeing, but also some opportunities to learn and consider new ways of working that have potential to better serve children, young people and families into the future.

At the beginning of the Local Authorities response to Covid-19, The Scrutiny Board will recall the Government introduced a number of 'Flexibilities' that children's services

could use to allow us to adapt to the new restrictive ways of working whilst maintaining a safe service for the children and families we work with. Given the statutory nature of the work in children's services, Solihull took the view that we would not instigate many of the 'flexibilities' available and continued to provide an ongoing safeguarding and support service via a blend of both physical and virtual responses. This included undertaking physical child protection and safeguarding visits but virtual visits to children looked after given they were in a safe environment due to their care plan. We also moved to conducting all of our meetings, court hearings, panels, conferences and reviews online which brought about its own challenges and new ways of working.

The blended approach during the initial stages of the lockdown was the correct decision to take as we found that a number of children and young people's vulnerabilities increased during the initial lockdown. This was due to a reduced oversight of their needs from schools and health colleagues as well as families not being able to offer the support they previously did.

4. What options have been considered and what is the evidence telling us about them?

4.1 How we have responded during the Covid-19 restrictions.

- Children's Services have continued to provide a safe service to children, young people and families throughout the pandemic.
- Extensive work has taken place across the directorate between social care and education in monitoring and co-ordinating support to vulnerable children whilst schools were closed. This has laid useful foundations for ongoing vulnerable children tracking work.
- For some young people, virtual visits using phone or video calling has increased their comfort in participating and communicating with their workers. This has included communication with advocates completing welfare return interviews for young people who have been missing from home or care. The option of video calling has seen an increased uptake. We will be exploring the continuation of this blended approach moving forward.
- Looked after children and young people were also offered virtual contact which then moved back to face to face contact in the summer following Government guidelines.
- There has been excellent partnership working across directorates to ensure that appropriate PPE is available and guidance issued to ensure consistent use of PPE from all staff. This has enabled visits to take place and children to be seen despite understandable concerns held about Covid-19 transmission by service users, carers and staff.
- Given the impact the local lockdown has had on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, continued partnership working with Solar has ensured that children continue to receive therapeutic mental health services they need.

- Direct payments for young people with special educational needs and disabilities have been offered more flexibly to families to reflect their very different experiences and needs during the pandemic. Payments to care experienced young people have been increased for 12 months in line with benefit increases.
- Laptops and 4G routers for vulnerable children and young people provided by the Department of Education have been distributed to support children's education.
- Staff have been willing to move between teams to ensure work pressures can be managed effectively across the whole service when teams have been affected by Covid 19 cases or self-isolation. There has been support from the wider council to maintain and provide agency staff to help support the maintenance of service delivery to children and families despite the additional pressure of Covid-19.

4.2 Challenges experienced during Covid-19 restrictions.

- There has been an increase in the number of children needing to be looked after by the Local Authority, due to an increase in complex safeguarding referrals and the need for immediate placements to keep children safe.
- Compared to the same period last year there has been a 23.5% increase in the number of local children starting to be looked after and an 83% reduction in UASC starting to be looked after. It is important to note that the social worker time required from referral to decision to accommodate for a local child is significantly greater and more complex than the process for accommodating an unaccompanied child arriving in Solihull. As this will involve assessment, child protection processes, decisions to remove children from their families, and legal planning and court processes. Thus the pressure on the social work service of the increase of local CLA is immense, though somewhat hidden in the data which shows the same number of children starting to be looked after as in the same period last year.
- This situation has been further compounded by children not leaving care as planned this is as a direct result of the Covid national emergency and pressure on other services including the Council's legal team; resulting in the total number of CLA rising by 49 from 469 (April 2020) to 518 (22/12/20). Of those children, 462 are local and 56 unaccompanied asylum seeking children.
- The rate of all CLA in England as at 31st March 2020 was 67 per 10,000 0-18 population; the rates for local Solihull CLA is currently 110 per 10,000.
- Children had not been seen by other services due to lockdown, especially early in the pandemic and this reduced the ability to work with families to prevent escalation of concerns meaning that concerns were often critical by the point of referral. This has at times led to urgent removals of children whose circumstances had become unsafe without this having been noticed by, for example, grandparents regularly visiting family homes. Social care staff have then worked intensively with such families and their networks in order to re-establish support mechanisms and in many cases to enable children to return safely home.

- Availability of suitable local placements for children has reduced meaning an increased reliance on higher tariff placements that the child or young person does not need. Providers have also levied additional costs for more complex needs children due to the lack of available placements nationally. This has had a significant impact on the cost of placements for Solihull.
- We have also experienced challenges in completing assessments due social distancing requirements, the wearing of masks and lack of safe spaces away from family homes to have discussions with vulnerable individuals such as those who are experiencing domestic abuse and cannot speak freely at home.

4.3 Impact on staff during Covid-19:

- Many staff have struggled to maintain daily routines and a firm boundary between home and work life, with many workers struggling to participate in discussions, meetings and court hearings within their own home due to confidentiality issues. The loss of the commute to and from work as a time to 'switch' between work and home modes has also been an issue where workers have commented they are 'living at work'.
- Staff have at times been very worried about the added risks that they are taking, even when using their PPE, in terms of Covid transmission when compared to others who are able to work purely from home and not have to go into homes or meet others within the community. The transmission of Covid back to loved ones who may be vulnerable has been a significant concern for many of our staff.
- Staff have found that a number of their work tasks take longer than normal due to challenges with visits, seeing people and also liaising with other partners / agencies due to their respective working patterns and restrictions meaning cases stay open longer within the service.
- Although caseloads have only risen slightly over the past 10 months with 19 being the average across the teams, we have seen a higher complexity of need within the referrals entering MASH with 65% of referrals converting to either a social work assessment or Sc.47 child protection enquiry compared to 56% conversion before the pandemic restrictions. This increase in assessments has added further pressure on to workers within the Family Support Teams.
- Our most robust and experienced staff have reported feeling more affected by issues and incidents presented during Covid-19 and have struggled at times to keep the momentum going given many have not had the opportunity to take a break and re-charge their batteries due to the continuous demand for safeguarding responses during the pandemic.

4.4 Support provided to staff

- We have provided additional agency social workers into the most effected teams to ease the pressure of the increasing demand and growing number of assessments. This is being kept under close review as additional staff maybe required moving forward.

- Managers have continued to offer regular supervision to their supervisees in line with Covid guidelines, as well as teams supporting each other via increased use of team WhatsApp groups.
- In addition to promoting access to the Employee Assistance Programme, we have linked in with the Council's wellbeing lead and piloted a suite of wellbeing tools that help managers have structured discussions with staff about all aspects of their wellbeing and to help devise bespoke plans to support staff as needed. A new wellbeing protocol is also in development.
- The Principal Social Worker has also offered individual debrief sessions for staff who have felt distressed by certain experiences. Staff have also been offered rapid responses to questions and concerns about Covid transmission risk so as to contain anxieties as much as is possible.
- In partnership with our Community Education Psychology team, critical incident debrief sessions and psychological support has been arranged for staff affected by significant incidents relating to the death or serious injury of children during the pandemic.
- Social Workers have also been offered the opportunity to take a longer break over the Christmas and New Year period with managers and agency workers covering the two days the workers would ordinarily be in over this time.
- Additional support has been secured from other directorates where there are children's social care trained staff who can offer immediate support for a few weeks in the new year to ease the pressure on the teams.

4.5 **ILACS action plan update**

As the Scrutiny Board will recall, Solihull Children's Services were inspected by Ofsted between the 11th and the 22nd of November 2019 resulting in an outcome of 'Requires Improvement'. From this outcome, we submitted a draft improvement action plan which was as agreed with Ofsted as a consequence of the COVID pandemic in April 2020. This action plan has been kept under regular review and formed a basis of a discussion with Ofsted over the summer as well as more recently in November. A further meeting with Ofsted is due in the New Year to review and reset the action plan.

Following an update to the Scrutiny Board on 12th of March 2020 it is worth noting the progress made against the improvement plan since that time. Both prior to and subsequent to the submission of the draft action plan, staff have been addressing the implementation of the actions identified. This is a considerable achievement given the significant implications of COVID 19, as well as the changes wrought by moving from one IT system to another during a period of lockdown.

There were many strengths and positives noted within our Childrens Services across all of the areas, but equally there were aspects of our practice that needed to be addressed to ensure our services are good or above moving forward for our children and families. Specific details of progress against each of the ten recommendations can be seen in the attached action plan but a brief update is shown below.

- i) Quality assurance and audit arrangements to improve practice so that leaders are aware of strengths and weaknesses:
 - Benchmarking ourselves against outstanding Local Authorities, we have built a new Quality assurance and audit framework which will be fully implemented in the new year.
 - There have also been ongoing revisions and developments to our performance management processes within the Directorate, and these are in the main nearing completion. We are currently confirming the ways in which these will be routinely reported upon, given some are newly developed. However, it is without doubt that the pandemic and the delivery of the new IT system has significantly impacted upon the pace of change which we continue to progress.
- ii) The timeliness of strategy meetings and inclusion of all relevant partners, including the police:
 - Processes have been reviewed with planned changes being taken forward. Escalation procedure has been implemented.
- iii) The practice and impact of “threshold” visits on children and families should be reviewed:
 - An initial audit was completed early spring and with a further audit is to be completed by the end of the year. We have reduced the number of these visits in line with Ofsted comments and only undertake them where information within the referral requires further examination.
- iv) The offer and take up and analysis of return home interviews following episodes of going missing:
 - This has involved working with the provider to develop more innovative and creative ways to engage with young people with feedback sought. The latter has identified that during the COVID period young people have been more likely to engage virtually and it has been noted that there has been an increase in the engagement of young people following the young person’s return home.
- v) The clarity of children in need and child protection plans so that parents and carers can more readily understand what is expected of them and why:
 - Revised assessment forms have been implemented within the new IT system which are more family friendly and are also being built into the new audit framework as noted above.
- vi) The timeliness of reviews of children in need of services at level 2 in the disabled children’s team:
 - Significant progress has been made in this area and all children in need at level 2 have been allocated a worker and reviewed. Further review of the processes and capacity of the team is ongoing following their move into the Family Support and Child Protection Service.

- vii) Levels of awareness and access for connected carers to training opportunities that will enhance their skills in caring for children and in strengthening placements:
 - In April, connected carers were made aware of the existing offer which is comparable to that received by full time foster carers. The foster carer handbook was updated accordingly and circulated in June. An E - learning training module continues to be supported.
- viii) Timely progress in the making of special guardianship orders where these are set out as the plan for permanence:
 - This is being progressed in a number of ways e.g. update of the financial policy which is in draft, to be ratified with our legal colleagues alongside other developments as part of the new Sufficiency Strategy.
- ix) Consideration of the need for homeless 16 and 17 year olds to be cared for, and to be made aware of that option, by the local authority:
 - A clear pathway for young people to access support and advice is being implemented, whilst a joint protocol /framework with Barnardo's youth Hub for support to 16-17 year olds has been updated with planned implementation in the new year. These were recently approved by the MHCLG during a meeting in December.
- x) The focus on and response to private fostering arrangements:
 - Continued awareness raising has taken place across various media platforms and is planned to be reported to the Local Safeguarding Childrens Partnership in due course.

5. Reasons for recommending preferred option

5.1 As noted in report detail above

6. Implications and Considerations

6.1 State how the proposals in this report contribute to the priorities in the [Council Plan](#):

Priority:	Contribution:
People and Communities: Take action to improve life chances in our most disadvantaged communities.	The actions taken by Children's Services prior to and during the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions has continued to focus on the safety and wellbeing of the children , young people and families we work for. We have maintained a safe and responsive service

<p>Sustainable, quality, affordable provision for adults & children with complex needs.</p>	<p>during very challenging and difficult times will continue to do so moving forward.</p> <p>We have also made substantial developments within our Ofsted action plan even against the backdrop of Covid-19 which again contributes to our safety and wellbeing offer to Solihull children.</p> <p>We have developed and are implementing our placement sufficiency strategy for Children Looked After /vulnerable children and young people aged 0 – 25</p> <p>Work is underway regarding the options for developing 2 small children’s homes within the Solihull borough for use of our more complex and higher needs young people to ensure they have a local placement option.</p> <p>The Permanency Hub is now set up to undertake assessments to consider Permanency options for our CLA to leave the care system via an SGO or other private order as well as developing our SGO finance and support offer.</p> <p>Recruitment activity to support the increase of mainstream foster carers is continuing.</p>
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6.2 Consultation and Scrutiny:

6.2.1 This report is presented to the Scrutiny Board for discussion and comment.

6.3 Financial implications:

6.3.1 The financial impacts of the above and the wider implications on staffing and the Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) are discussed in the MTFS Budget Strategy report elsewhere on this agenda. Various actions have been endorsed by the Budget Strategy Group for consideration and approval by Full Cabinet and Council.

6.4 Legal implications:

6.4.1 The actions detailed above are compliant with legislation and current Government guidance.

6.5 Risk implications:

6.5.1 Risks identified with the failure to meet our statutory duties regarding children in need of help and protection and those in care and care experienced young people are already identified on our risk register and it is officer's opinion that they are adequately managed.

6.5.2 The increase in children brought into LA care and assessments is also an ongoing risk. This is being supported by additional staff and reprioritising critical service delivery so as to ensure all children are seen, assessed and have a safety plan in place.

6.6 Equality implications:

Children's assessments, and where appropriate their subsequent child in need, child protection and care plans, are required to take into account sensitively and appropriately any considerations of ethnicity, gender and disability so that needs can be best met.

7. List of appendices referred to

7.1 Ofsted Action Plan

8. Background papers used to compile this report

8.1 None

9. List of other relevant documents

9.1 None