

Meeting: Children, Education and Skills Sub-committee

Date: 8th July 2021

Title: Safeguarding Children and Young People in the Covid-19 Pandemic - Update

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Service: Children, Young People & Learning

Wards affected: All

1. Purpose:

To provide to the Children, Education and Skills Sub-committee an update to the overview report presented in September 2020, of the response of North Tyneside Council Children's Services Early Help and Social Care services to the need to work differently during the Covid-19 pandemic. Focusing on maintaining the highest standards of safeguarding practice and support to children and families.

2. Recommendation(s):

It is recommended that the Sub-committee:

- a) Note the information provided;
- b) Request further information if appropriate;
- c) Make such recommendations as the Sub-committee consider appropriate.

3. Information

Background

Throughout the pandemic Early Help and Social Care services have maintained a business-as-usual-but-different approach to delivering services to support, care and protect vulnerable children and families. Since September services have largely returned to normal but underpinned by risk assessments to keep children, families and staff safe and prevent transmission of Covid. The staff group have worked with incredible commitment and dedication and have maintained on the whole, high standards of practice and performance. The following are individual area updates:

- Children's Homes

Our Children's Homes have continued to offer warmth, care and support to children in our care. They have had to contend with using PPE and additional restrictions whilst at the same time supporting children and young people experiencing the pandemic. The teams have been able to cover the gaps where staff members were unable to continue in their role due to shielding or specific vulnerabilities, with other staff from across the service identified to assist.

Given the additional health complexities we had to reduce our residential short break service so that we could keep children safe. Instead of offering short breaks to 5 children a night we were only able to offer the service to 2 children a night and then on a risk assessed basis around need and complexity. However, by April 2021 we were back to making an offer of overnight short breaks to all children accessing the services. The service has been valued highly by families especially as some of the children were not in school.

- Care Leavers

We recognised the additional vulnerabilities of our Care Leaver, particularly around isolation and so support was increased over the last year. This was not only in terms of visits and contact but also practical support such as food, toiletries, and activities. Our Care Leavers have been disproportionately impacted in terms of employment. Many of our care experienced young people found employment in the retail and services sectors, often this was casual in nature and as such their employment ended without protection. We have a lot of work to do to try and address the NEET rate in our care experienced population and we are working with colleagues in adult learning to finalise plans.

During the last 12 months we have worked with the national advocacy service, Coram Voice to complete the New Belongings survey. Despite being completed during lockdown we had a good response rate and the results outlined 10 'Bright Spots' of practice (good practice) and a number of areas for us to focus on: -

- Having a good friend
- Having a trusted person
- Coping financially
- Experience anxiety
- Happy with appearance

Young people have worked with us to develop an action plan and delivery of the action plan has been adopted as one of the priorities for the Corporate Parenting Forum.

- Fostering

It has been a challenging time for our fostering community, but they have been amazing in their support to children in their care. As we reported in September 2020, it remains the case that no Foster Carers have decided to end their care of children as a result of the pandemic. They have continued to offer placements to children even when at times of crisis, there may have been worries about infection risks. These evidences the absolute commitment of our carers to our children in care. We have very sadly lost two, valued Foster Carers to Covid and this has caused great sadness across the community.

We have just celebrated Fostering Fortnight and have thanked all our carers for their incredible work with a card and handmade candle.

The Fostering Team have provided high levels of support to both our mainstream carers and our connected carers. The recent Fostering Survey had the following headlines: -

- 84% are satisfied or fairly satisfied with the service
 - 80% Good or very good training provision
 - 79% reported that the supervising social worker was helpful or very helpful to carers in their role
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- Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH)

In April the Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) returned to the office on a rota basis. The MASH is critical to decision making for children and young people within the Borough and while the service has worked well remotely, it is recognised that the quality of the discussion, information sharing and decision making across the partners is enhanced by face to face working. The staff are to be commended for their resilience and tenacity in managing this critical function throughout the course of the pandemic.

At the end of March 2021, we have seen an increase in referrals when compared to 19/20. The rate of referrals per 10,000 at the end of 20/21 is 404.3, higher than the March 2020 figure of 378.7. The England rate for 19/20 was 534, and our Statistical Neighbours, 603. There has been further increases since March with April and May being significantly higher than previous monthly averages.

- Social Work and Early Help

Given the nature of the work direct face-to-face work with children, young people, parents and carers is core to Social Work and Early Help practice in North Tyneside. As reported in September 2020, the pandemic has, by necessity, required new ways of working. Practitioners responded quickly to the changing environment and have been incredibly creative and innovative when restrictions have been in place. While we are now in the main offering a face to face service, we have taken the learning from the early days of the pandemic and we are using a blended approach with virtual contact and virtual meetings supporting our face to face work. We have found that younger children do not always engage well in a virtual environment whereas older children and adolescents have overall, appreciated the blended approach.

In looking at the performance data for 2020/21 compared to the previous year, we have seen the following: -

- A 24.2% increase in early help plans.
- An increase of almost 200 children being supported by the statutory social work teams.
- An increase of 24.7% in children on child protection plans.
- Stability in our children in care numbers.
- At the end of March 2021, 98.2% of children who were subject to a child protection plan had been visited within timescales. (167 out of 170 children).
- 90% of Children in Care reviews held within timescales.

- Nursery

The Ready for School nursery at the Riverside Centre has been operational throughout the pandemic providing childcare for vulnerable children and the children of key workers throughout the pandemic. Staff have continued to work with changing and developing national guidance to ensure safe best practice with young children. They have offered outreach services to families and have developed a range of online support sessions for parents to access. Sadly, in June we have experienced an outbreak of Covid and for the first time since the pandemic started, we have had to close the nursery to allow for self-isolation and deep cleaning. Staff have immediately moved to a virtual outreach support offer so that families are all receiving support.

- Family Time

The safe and appropriate delivery of family time has been a particular challenge. Children in Care have a legal right, save in exceptional circumstances, to family time with their parents and siblings. Family time inevitably means bringing multiple households. We have maintained a face-to-face family time offer, subject to robust risk assessments, where possible. Since April we have been able to facilitate face to face family time for all the children that require it but at a reduced level given the regulations and expectations around cleaning between sessions. Where possible, and weather permitting family time has moved to an outdoors venue but clearly, we have indoor arrangements and had to source more venues so that the full offer could be delivered. We have maintained a blended offer of face to face and virtual family time and will continue to offer this even post pandemic as the mixed approach has brought benefits.

- Youth Justice Service

The Youth Justice Service has continued to deliver services to young people and families throughout the pandemic again both face to face and virtual. In April we received notification that we would be inspected by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP). This was a virtual, weeklong inspection that commenced on the 26th March. Of interest was the fact that this was the first HMIP inspection of a Youth Offending service where the entire inspection cohort was under Covid restrictions and as such we have some external assurance of our practice during the pandemic. The report is due for publication week commencing the 26th July.

The use of the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020

The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 provided legal flexibility for the Council to diverge from some of its statutory responsibilities during the pandemic. These were subject to review and consultation in February 2021. In response to the consultation, the DfE decided to continue only with the proposals to extend the existing flexibilities on medical reports, virtual visits and Ofsted inspection cycles. The current flexibilities expire on 30 September 2021.

In North Tyneside Council has only used the flexibilities made available by the Regulations where it has been deemed necessary and in the best interests of children and young people. This has been extremely limited. For example, the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 allow applicant foster carers to self-report medical information without the need for information to be provided by their General Practitioner. This flexibility has been used by North Tyneside Council to ensure the timely consideration by

Panel and the Agency Decision Maker of Foster Carer applications that would have otherwise been subject to significant delay. Likewise, the regulations provide flexibility for Social Worker visits to children in care, both in terms of the statutorily prescribed timescales and allowing for visiting to be virtual - conducted by telephone, video-link or other electronic means. We are not using the flexibilities at the current time and in all but exception circumstances we have not used the flexibilities since September 2020.

Learning from the Covid-19 Pandemic

North Tyneside Children's Services are a Partner in Practice with the DfE. Through this arrangement we were approached to do some further study and analysis around lessons learnt from working during the pandemic, that could be shared and used across the sector. In partnership with Professor Eileen Munro, Professor Andrew Turnell and Marie Devine, we worked with three other local authorities to explore: -

What helps and hinders practitioners build safety through naturally connected networks during a pandemic when professional contact is limited?

Under the conditions of COVID-19, direct professional involvement with families and children in statutory social care services has been significantly reduced. This led to local authorities having to think about how they can work with, and support, children, young people and their families in different ways. The identification and involvement of the naturally connected network is something we had been embedding prior to Covid but it became very clear during the pandemic that this was a key feature of how we could build safety. Practitioner embraced this and became incredibly innovative in their approach to working with networks.

The study is small in size and consequently the findings are tentative but do support the hypothesis that the use of networks makes a worthwhile contribution to improving children's safety and wellbeing. Alongside the study we have published an Executive summary from a local authority perspective around our learning. The report has been published and there are a series of events and tools that we will produce to share across the sector to disseminate the learning.

Next Steps

The pandemic has understandably brought with it an increase in demand for our services and an increase in the complexity of issues. This is putting pressure on the service and in particular on the staff teams. We are increasing our resources to try and meet this demand, but the recruitment market is challenging at this time.

To support staff we have introduced weekly communication, regular sessions with the Assistant Director and a range of workshops on trauma, resilience and self-care. These have all been welcomed and appreciated by the teams. Across the service they continue to feedback that they have good access to support and supervision and that managers are visible and accessible.

We are beginning to look at getting teams back into the office albeit on a rota basis and this has been very warmly welcomed across the board. From Monday 28th June, the Safe & Supported social work teams will return to the office. We recognise that learning,

especially for newly qualified staff has been impacted by not being alongside their more experienced colleagues, and this has been a key driver for returning to some office working. Other teams will follow dependant of available office space, given social distancing has impacted on available desks.

Our Children's Centres will also open in time for the summer holidays so that we can look to deliver a range of activities to support children and families during the summer break.

While we are still experiencing the challenges of working in a pandemic, we have largely returned to our full-service offer. This is testament to the commitment and dedication of staff across the service who have worked tirelessly to support, care and protect children and families across the borough and are to be commended for this.