

Report to:

SCRUTINY LEADERSHIP BOARD

Relevant Officer:

Mrs Diane Booth, Director of Children's Services

Date of Meeting:

1 July 2020

CHILDREN'S SERVICES RESPONSE TO COVID-19

1.0 Purpose of the report:

1.1 To provide an overview of the Children's Services response to Covid-19.

2.0 Recommendation(s):

2.1 To review and challenge the Children's Services response to Covid-19.

3.0 Reasons for recommendation(s):

3.1 To ensure robust scrutiny of the response.

3.2 Is the recommendation contrary to a plan or strategy adopted or approved by the Council? No

3.3 Is the recommendation in accordance with the Council's approved budget? No

4.0 Other alternative options to be considered:

4.1 None.

5.0 Council priority:

5.1 The relevant Council priority is

- Communities: Creating stronger communities and increasing resilience.

6.0 Background information

6.1 When it became evident that the country was likely to move to similar levels of social restriction as those already in place in other parts of Europe, planning began for continuing to deliver children's social care services in Blackpool. Detailed planning began in the week beginning 9 March 2020 and a revised model of service delivery was launched from 23 March 2020.

6.2 To provide both some degree of resilience to the service in its discharge of its core

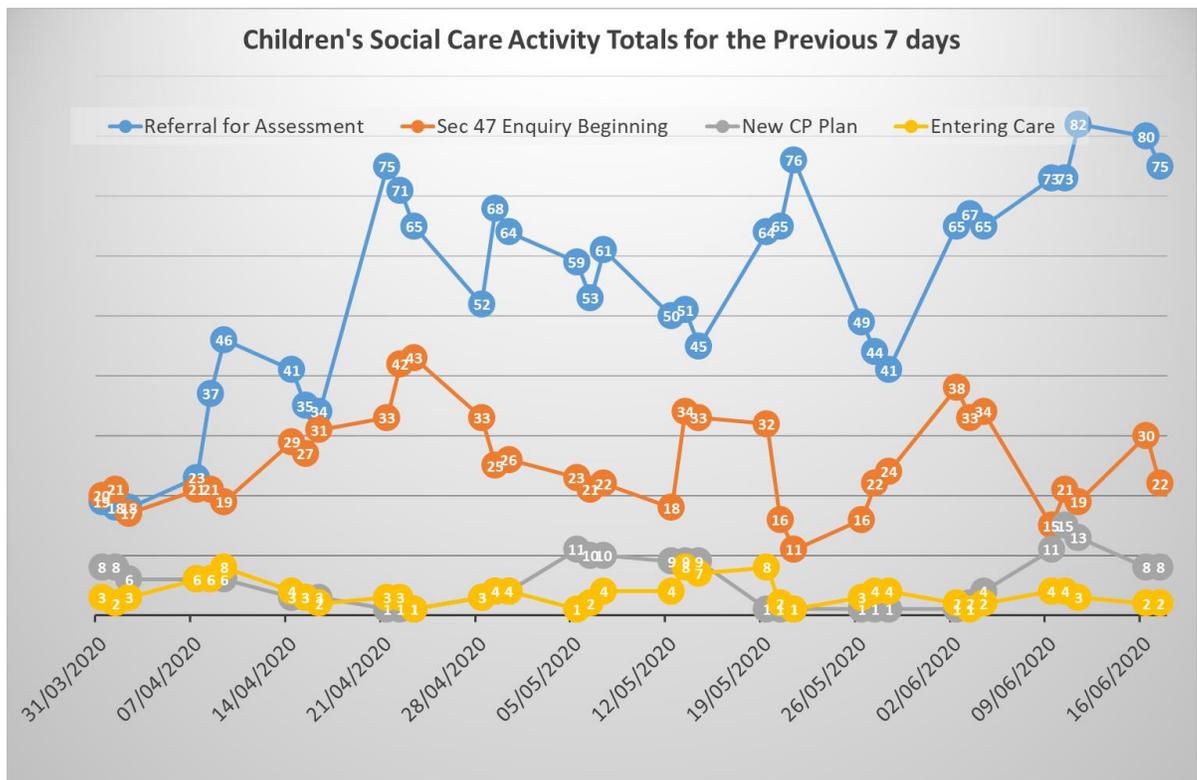
safeguarding functions, while also respecting the social distancing approach, Children's Social Care, Early Help and the Youth Justice Service were split into two separate business units: Team A and Team B, each with their own group of team managers, service managers and Heads of Service (workers remained with their normal team managers). The teams each had between 150 and 170 workers (80 to 90 social workers) and in any one week, one of the teams was office based, while the other worked from home, alternating weekly.

- 6.3 Within each of these units, social workers were divided between those focused on incoming work and those focused on ongoing work. Early Help services were divided equally between Teams A and B and played a vital role in supporting families experiencing difficulties especially around food poverty, through the Corona Kindness hubs.
- 6.4 The team A and team B structure went live on 23 March 2020, the day of the announcement of lockdown.
- 6.5 To focus ongoing activity, Team Managers were asked to evaluate all the open children, young people and families in their teams and to identify those of most concern, which required the greatest level of oversight (REDS), and other cases where oversight clearly needed to be maintained (AMBERs).
- 6.6 Since the beginning of the new structure, daily activity has been monitored across the service, the capacity of the service and the key core social work posts within it; and the number of children and families self-isolating. Senior managers have also been provided with a twice-weekly updated list of all children open to the service, when they were last seen, the manager's rating of concern; whether the child/family is self-isolating; whether children in care are living with carers in groups identified as particularly vulnerable to the virus; and when the children's circumstances were last risk assessed.
- 6.7 Beginning from 9 April 2020, the approach in the light of the then current national restrictions and social distancing arrangements was refined. There was a move to having a greater focus on the children about whom was the greatest concerns – only these children were to be in receipt of face to face visits by social workers. Other children open to the service were to be 'virtually' visited, using technology with which the family is familiar; or be kept in phone contact with, where virtual visits are not possible. All workers have been based at home since 9 April 2020, with the exception of a reduced skeleton duty staff at the front door and in the MASH. Thankfully, we have seen very low rates of sickness from COVID amongst our staff, in common with the rest of the council.
- 6.8 Planning is ongoing for a return to some office-based work from late June/early July, with the service again divided in two and teams likely to be predominantly office-

based for one week and then working from home the next. The service is continuing to strive to balance the needs of the service, particularly around direct work with children and families, with the risk of infection/transmission, both within the local community and within our own workforce.

Demand and Activity During COVID

- 6.9 As can be seen from the chart below, incoming demand for Children’s Social Care intervention was initially very low. The service therefore proactively sought to publicise that Children’s Social Care was open for business through the council’s Facebook page, Twitter feed, in addition to local radio and newspaper.
- 6.10 Subsequently, there has been a return to demand close to pre-COVID levels and then rising further still, reflecting rising levels of need amongst families, tiredness with restriction; and the return of agencies to something closer to their normal service delivery. Through COVID the number of contacts being received from the community has been particularly pleasing, alerting the service to families in difficulty, which have been higher than under normal circumstances.



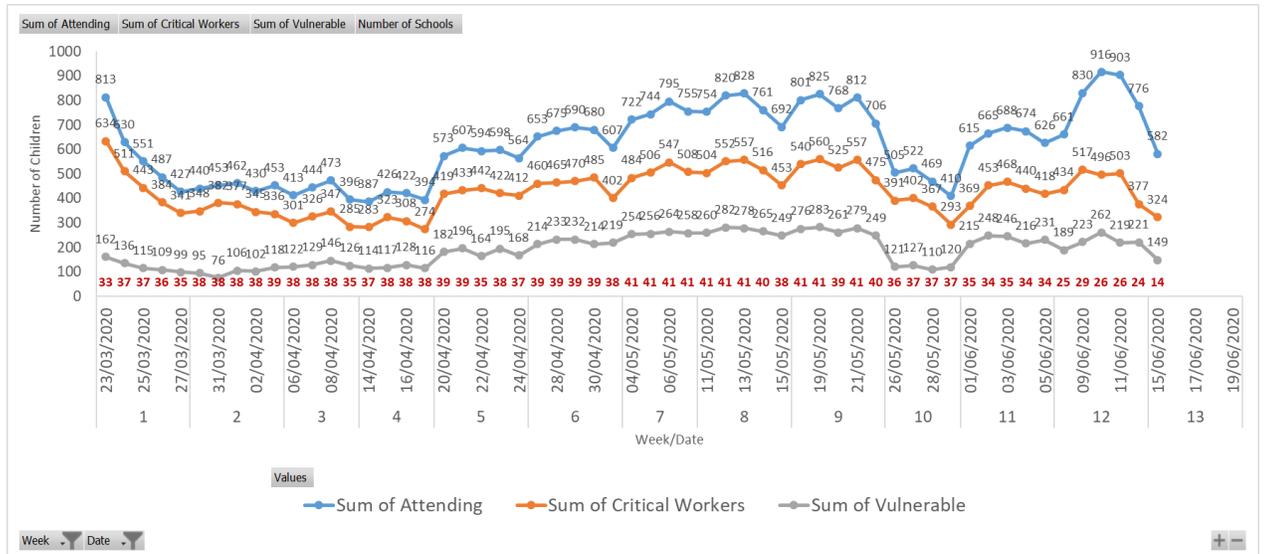
- 6.11 In the chart above, one can also see a pattern of presenting demand being influenced by Bank Holidays and uncertainty about government restrictions on movement (there has been an unfortunate conjunction during COVID).

- 6.12 In terms of the reasons for demand for social care assessment/intervention, there is limited evidence available at the moment, but of those becoming subject to a child protection plan, there has been a growth in those becoming subject for reasons of neglect, rather than Emotional Abuse (DA). Nearly 40% of those becoming subject to a plan had previously been subject to a plan, probably reflecting families already struggling, struggling more in lockdown.
- 6.13 Looking at the children and families newly opening to children's social care, the pattern remains similar to previously – it's mostly (two thirds) caused by abuse and neglect, but there has been a growth in family dysfunction and inter-generational conflict during lockdown – often between male carers/fathers and sons.
- 6.14 The area of greatest concern through the COVID period has been mental health and well-being. In particular, there have been increasing numbers of care leavers struggling with their mental health through the period of lockdown. There have been incidences of attempted suicide, self-harm and harm to others. Support for this group in the community to prevent escalation is one of the services' key priorities (and for the wider partnership as well). As a recent Violence Reduction Network report makes clear, this is part of a wider picture where Blackpool is facing high levels of presenting demand for mental health services – around double the presenting issues in other similar sized areas, such as Preston, Lancaster or Blackburn with Darwen.

Vulnerable Children and School

- 6.15 Local schools have been contacting all vulnerable children – at least weekly; and one of our special schools is scoping out non-school-based support for children and families through the summer.
- 6.16 Overall, the strength of Government messaging about the need for families to stay at home has made it very difficult to persuade families with children open to children's social care, or other children deemed to be vulnerable, to agree to their children attending school. Attendance rates in Blackpool schools are nationally average for vulnerable children, It may be the case that wider opening of schools to children will help, but the vast majority of vulnerable children are not attending school, both locally and nationally.
- 6.17 Having noted the above, attendance at schools by vulnerable pupils has risen through the COVID period, see the chart below, which contains daily attendance (*please note that figures rise in retrospect, as some schools report on a weekly basis, so last week's figures will be accurate, while this weeks will not*). The proportion of vulnerable children attending school in Blackpool is in line with the national average (14%).
- 6.18 One can also see from the chart below the steady growth in the total number of children attending school, as attendance has been opened up to specific year groups.

6.19 Recent communication with the Department for Education (DfE) and the Office of the Regional Schools Commissioner (RSC) confirms that Blackpool’s schools are further along with increasing the number of children attending, than other areas.



6.20 Finally, the service has also overseen the ordering and, finally, the distribution of laptops and routers to vulnerable children across the borough – up to 900 children will receive this help.

What has been the impact of Covid-19 on improvement progress and which areas of service have been impacted the most?

6.21 Through the COVID period, the service has remained relatively confident about the ability to discharge vital safeguarding functions. Ongoing face to face contact has continued with those children and young people about whom there is the most concern, including children open to children’s social care, but also care leavers and young people open to the Youth Justice Service. Food parcels have also been provided to the most vulnerable families throughout the COVID lockdown period.

6.22 In spite of this, the service remains chronically aware that children and families are more vulnerable and less visible than they should be. One can contact families, or episodically visit those felt to be most at risk, but it is no substitute to the innate protections of ‘normal’ life and multiple professionals and other adults having daily contact with and sight of children outside of the family home. Knowing this fact places a heavy mental and emotional burden on those who work with children and young people.

6.23 Given national guidance on social distancing, purposeful direct work with children and families was not possible for a considerable period of time (and remains difficult still)

and there is also the worry about the possible escalation of concerns in families, with the prolonged nature of the current measures, particularly with regard to domestic violence, which is already a significant driver for work locally. One can see signs of this in the rising number of referrals as the country moves towards two and the three months of lockdown. Government guidance has also posed considerable issues for contact with children in care with their birth parents. Throughout COVID virtual family time has been supported, but not always at the frequency of pre-COVID times. Some direct face to face family time will be reintroduced for parents with the youngest babies in care from next week.

- 6.24 Court hearings have become virtual; and there has been a slowing in court proceedings, as those proceedings are largely dependent on assessment work with adults and children, which is difficult or impossible to complete satisfactorily without face to face contact with the individual children or adults concerned. In addition, the judiciary also decided that contested hearings, i.e. those where parents/carers are not in agreement with the local authority's care plan for their children, would not be heard virtually, but only in person. The plan for court proceedings for the foreseeable future is for hybrid hearings; using both virtual and in person attendance at court, depending on the circumstances of the individual case. Overall, this has led to a slowing in court proceedings and we have been delayed in bringing children on care orders before the court for discharge – which was a key ongoing project designed to significantly lower the current numbers of children in local authority care.
- 6.25 The Getting to Good (Improvement) Board has met three times virtually during COVID; and the work of the Children's Safeguarding Assurance Partnership has also continued at both a county-wide and local level. The degree of managerial grip within Children's Services in both continuing to deliver services and also continuing on the improvement journey has been positively noted by both the Department for Education (DfE) and Ofsted colleagues; and positively compared with other areas in the region and nationally. Through this period, Blackpool has continued to lead on the launch of the new county-wide threshold document for children's services and this will be launched across the local partnership shortly.
- 6.26 The council's care planning and permanence planning panels resumed, after a short break at the start of COVID; and continue weekly, virtually. Recruitment has also moved successfully on-line. Training of council workers has largely moved to being delivered online using Microsoft Teams and this has been successful, delivering virtual training on Blackpool Families Rock, neglect, workshops on undertaking virtual home visits, in addition to virtual weekly support sessions to social workers in their first year of practice. It would be fair to note, however, that some of our less experienced staff have still struggled with the move to working at home and their continued absence from the wider support network of the office.
- 6.27 Similarly, following a period when we focused child protection reviews and reviews

for children in our care on those children with whom there is the greatest concern, virtual reviews have now recommenced for all those in the council's care or subject to a child protection plan. This has left a legacy of out of time reviews that the service is currently working through. Overall, the involvement of key safeguarding partners, such as the Police, schools and health and third sector colleagues during COVID in child protection work has been good.

- 6.28 In spite of unprecedentedly difficult circumstances, the service has continued to visit the families that there is most concerned about – in the first two weeks of June 760 children and young people have been seen. There has been telephone contact with 500 more. The service has also sought to continue and develop direct work remotely and has also developed and deployed a virtual support platform for teenagers during COVID. Virtual support has been particularly successful with teenagers who have, in some cases, engaged better using technology than face to face, which is learning that can be taken forward in the future.
- 6.29 For example, activity packs have been distributed and virtual workspaces set up to continue work with some of the most vulnerable young people working with our Child Exploitation Partnership service and this has been warmly welcomed by young people:
- A 14 year old female: “I like the sessions on the phone. I like talking. I like doing the work book.
 - A 14 year old female: “It’s been good, I am going to make it (the posted activity) really colourful and good in my own time”
 - A 17 year old female told her keyworker that she “really liked” doing the art project set and supported by AWAKEN worker via safe distance meetings in the community and telephone calls. The young person’s keyworker commented that they had put lots of effort into the project, despite experiencing turbulent times. The process of doing the work in her own time with support - sending the photographs of the completed work, then receiving feedback from the worker – made them feel “very proud”.
- 6.30 In summary, the service and the workforce have responded well during a difficult time and vulnerable children in Blackpool have been as safe as they could be in the circumstances. The service has continued on its improvement journey, although a large part of business has had to be conducted virtually. The shock to national systems caused by COVID has led to some slow-down in some areas, most notably court work, but conversely, COVID has also provided an opportunity to demonstrate strong leadership in the delivery of Children’s Services – and this has been recognised externally..
- 6.31 The area where progress has been most impeded is in the direct work with families

and the development of the new relationship-based model of practice, which would really benefit from more face to face contact. Of course, this has to be balanced with the risks to our own workers and children and families from more contact.

- 6.32 Finally, there will be definite legacy issues arising from the COVID period, with harm and unmet need that was not apparent during lockdown becoming clearer afterwards. It is difficult to estimate the scope of this likely demand for service, not least because Blackpool has continued to receive a relatively high level of contact from local agencies and the community, but it is certain to exist and we need to be prepared for that through the autumn and winter of 2020.

Does the information submitted include any exempt information? No

7.0 List of Appendices:

- 7.1 None.

8.0 Legal considerations:

- 8.1 Central government has not authorised any deviation from local authority statutory responsibilities to children with unmet need or safeguarding risks, although there has been some acknowledgement of the greater difficulty of discharging those responsibilities during COVID.

9.0 Human resources considerations:

- 9.1 Provision of Children's Services during the COVID period is a delicate balancing act between the need of families and children for support and protection and the need to ensure that our own workers are as safe as possible. We have successfully protected our staff to date and have had a very low level of COVID sickness throughout the past 3 months. Transition to the new model of service delivery will have to be sensitively and sensibly managed.

10.0 Equalities considerations:

- 10.1 None, although it is likely that through the COVID period, especially lockdown, individual groups with protected characteristics, particularly those living in households where domestic abuse is a feature, will be and have been at greater risk.

11.0 Financial considerations:

- 11.1 Finance colleagues estimate that the COVID period has increased cost pressures by between 11 and 20%, in relation to residential placements and foster placements provided by independent fostering agencies.

12.0 Risk management considerations:

12.1 See section 9.1 above.

13.0 Ethical considerations:

13.1 Children and families with whom Children's Services work will typically be amongst the most vulnerable and disadvantaged in society. Lesser levels of support for those children and families inevitably has ramifications for increasing the level of vulnerability and disadvantage that they face.

14.0 Internal/external consultation undertaken:

14.1 Throughout all the COVID period, Children's Services has had ongoing discussion with colleagues in Finance, Human Resources and Health & Safety within the council, in addition to regular weekly meetings with key partner agencies (Police, Health, Schools and other third sector partners).

15.0 Background papers:

15.1 None.