

# Report of the Head of Service, South Locality to the meeting of the Corporate Parenting Panel to be held on 29 June 2020

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**Subject:**

**UPDATE ON CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SERVICES**

**Summary statement:**

This report provides an update on Children's Social Care Services arrangements during covid-19.

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**Portfolio:**

Children & Families

**Overview & Scrutiny Area:**

Children & Families

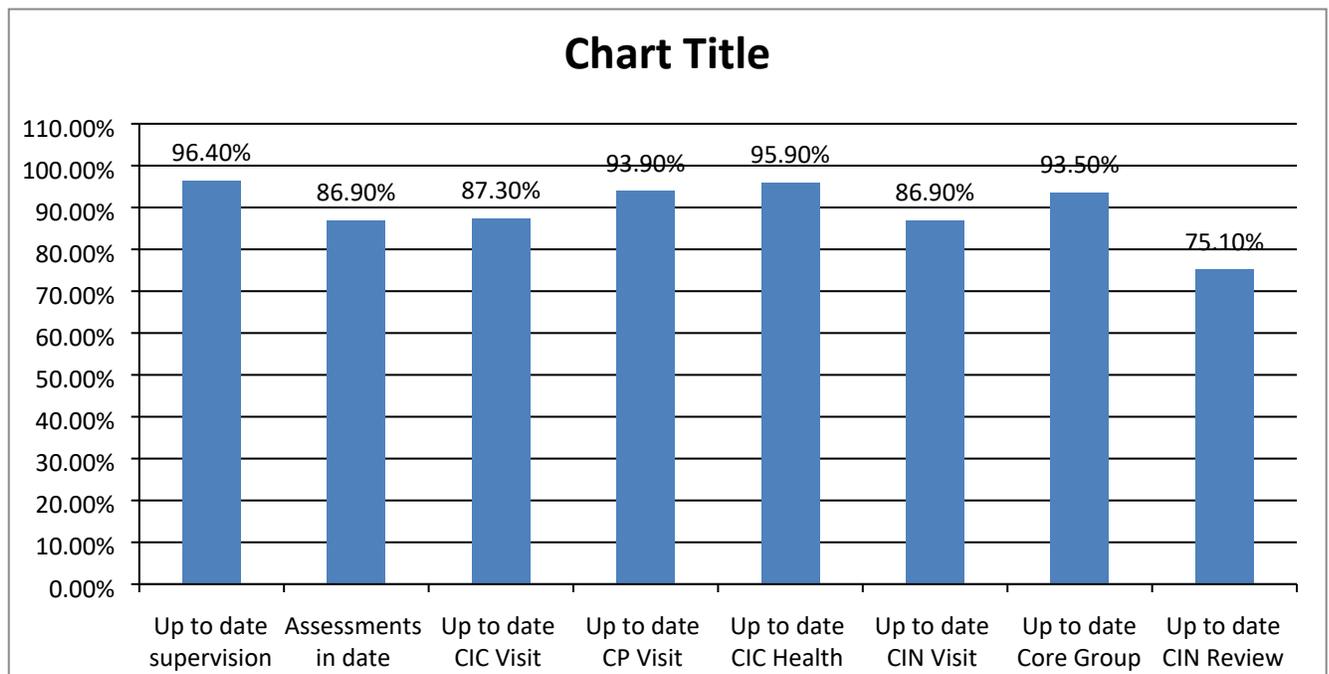
# Report to the Corporate Parenting Panel

## Children’s social care services arrangements during Covid-19

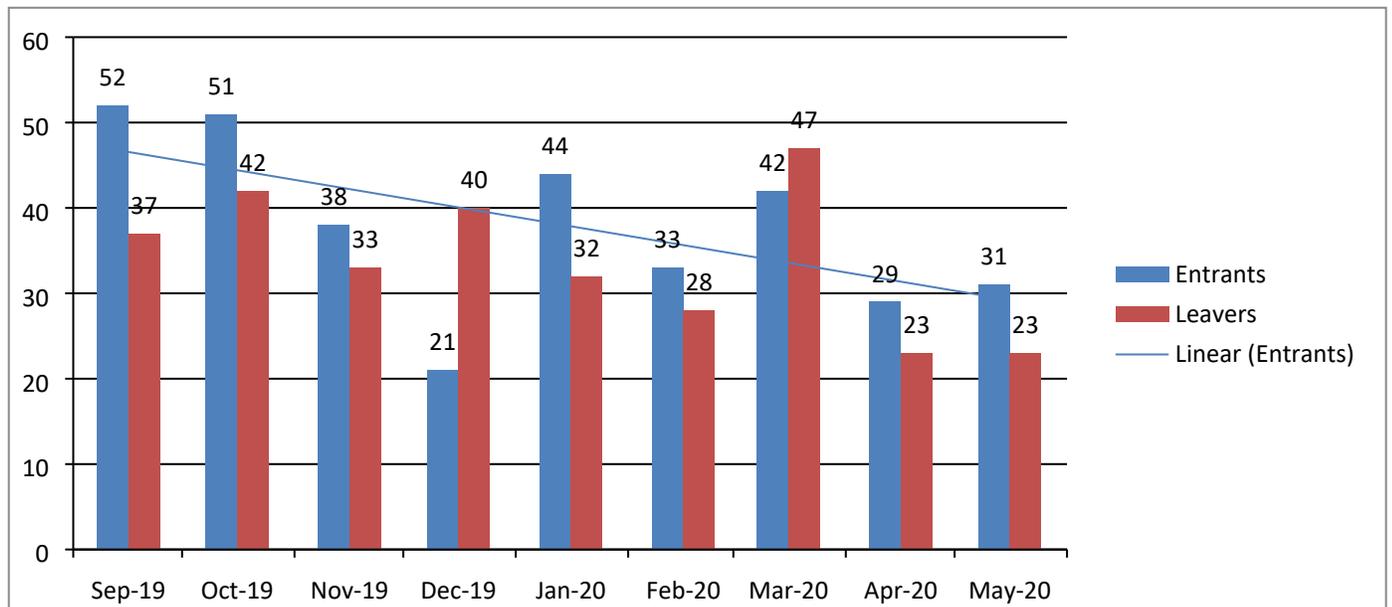
### Children in care and leaving care

#### Performance snapshot

The graph below is a snapshot of performance within children’s social care services at 27<sup>th</sup> May 2020. The graph covers a number of key performance measures and illustrates that performance has been maintained or improved during the “lockdown” period.



## Children entering and leaving the care system in Bradford



In the six months between November 2019 and March 2020 a total of 206 children entered the care system in Bradford and a total of 200 left care.

As can be seen above there is a gradual downwards trend, although figures vary considerably month by month. March 2020 was clearly a busy month but April and May have seen relatively low rates of entry to care, although we cannot yet say that this is linked to the lockdown.

### Visits to children in care

Due to the need to protect our carers and placements, we made the decision that all social work visits to children in care would be virtual during lockdown unless there was no alternative. Therefore some face to face visits have taken place where necessary, with social distancing measures and PPE used to protect from infection.

### Contact for children in care

At the start of lockdown all face to face contact was suspended although we retained the facility to provide face to face contact in specific circumstances for example one child with life-limiting medical conditions who was on her end of life journey. This approach was consistent with other authorities in the Yorkshire and Humber Region.

Mobile phones with video calling facilities have been provided for some carers and families to enable regular video or phone contact and with younger children, carers have been able to keep in touch with birth families, send photos etc.

This position had to be communicated to the court but has been consistent with the approach taken by other authorities in the region.

In line with the gradual lifting of restrictions we are now reviewing this with a plan to gradually begin the cautious resumption of face to face contact.

## **Foster Care Services**

There has been minimal disruption within foster carer provision. Particularly vulnerable placements were identified and targeted with additional support at the very beginning and this has stabilised any challenges that have occurred. One young person has moved out of a long term placement temporarily due to the carers ill-health and his inability to abide by the rules of lockdown, we are confident this placement can be restored once risk subsides.

We have taken a number of practical actions to widen the Foster Care Offer with a view to supporting stability, retention and recruitment including:

- RAG rating of placement vulnerability from the start of lockdown targeting additional emotional and practical support where most needed.
- Daily Q&A availability for carers via the private Facebook group providing consistent access to information and guidance
- Therapeutic support available to carers and children virtually as required
- Carers have valued being allowed to make choices for children as a family rather than blanket rules for example on education attendance, recognising that what might create stability for one child can cause instability for another.
- Sharing of resources to positively occupy children and young people

No “across the board” additional payments/remuneration have been made to foster carers during lockdown. We have however maintained skill payments for those shielding and unable to take children into placements and maintained skill payments for those having to self isolate and unable to take children into placements. In addition we have considered additional funding requests on a case by case basis for example exercise equipment, trampolines etc. as a means of keeping children and young people active and entertained in the home. Locality teams have provided mobile phones for some foster carers to support video and phone contact.

## **Children’s Homes**

Within our children’s homes the restrictions on the freedom of movement for our children has been the main challenge. Staff have had to work hard to keep children occupied whilst also following social distancing and self-isolation guidelines. Inevitably some young people have found this frustrating and experienced difficulties and there has been an increase in the need for physical intervention by staff in one of the homes.

Additional funding of around £300 per home has been provided for additional activities during the lockdown.

In general the staff teams have responded extremely well to the challenges.

In respect of short break provision for disabled children, the importance of having a robust testing procedure in place for residential care will allow us to attempt to manage the virus before there is any consideration to alter the short breaks offer.

On two weekends in May we had occasion to make decisions to manage any spread of COVID 19:

- To suspend a service for just less of 48 hours and test all staff before resuming short break provision safely. This was successful and there was no further spread of the virus.
- To isolate staff and substitute with agency workers to allow provision to continue, where provision cannot be suspended.

The current guidance that people need to self-isolate for 14 days following a return from holiday is likely to present considerable challenges in the residential sector if this guidance remains in place as the summer progresses.

### **Care Leavers**

During the period of lockdown the 16+ service has:

- created a specific email address for care leavers to enable them to communicate with staff more easily
- created “tic-tok” clips for care leavers online with staff and young people inputting into the video to share positive messages and to enable people to feel in touch with the service.
- supported care leavers to increase their Vitamin D intake in line with guidance
- distributed activity packs and food parcels to our care leavers
- ensured that all files are up to date with young persons contact details clearly visible to enable any worker to make contact with a young person if their own worker was not in work.
- developed a list of particularly vulnerable care leavers and updated this weekly, prioritising these young people for contact during lockdown.
- developed a new leaflet for young people with useful information and contacts and distributed this to young people via a variety of means.
- contacted all young people living in their own tenancy and high needs young people on a weekly basis.
- provided additional physical and financial support for young people who have needed it due to lockdown presenting extra strain on their finances in respect of food, fuel etc.

Visits have continued but following social distancing guidelines and supplemented by video and telephone calls.

### **Attendance at school**

Children’s social care currently have more than 5000 children open to us and all are deemed” vulnerable” and thus required to attend school during the lockdown unless there are specific health reasons for them not to e.g. they need to self-isolate or “shield”.

There has been inevitable resistance to this from many families and social workers have been asked to actively encourage attendance at school for these children. Reports from other Local Authorities across the country suggest that this is a common picture. The numbers of vulnerable Bradford children attending school during lockdown has begun to increase. In some cases the lack of school attendance has placed additional pressure on an already fragile situation however as yet there have been no occasions when a child has entered care as a direct result of the lockdown. Inevitably however there are cases in which factors such as domestic abuse, neglect or lack of parental supervision have been exacerbated by the fact that the children have been at home for much longer periods than normal.

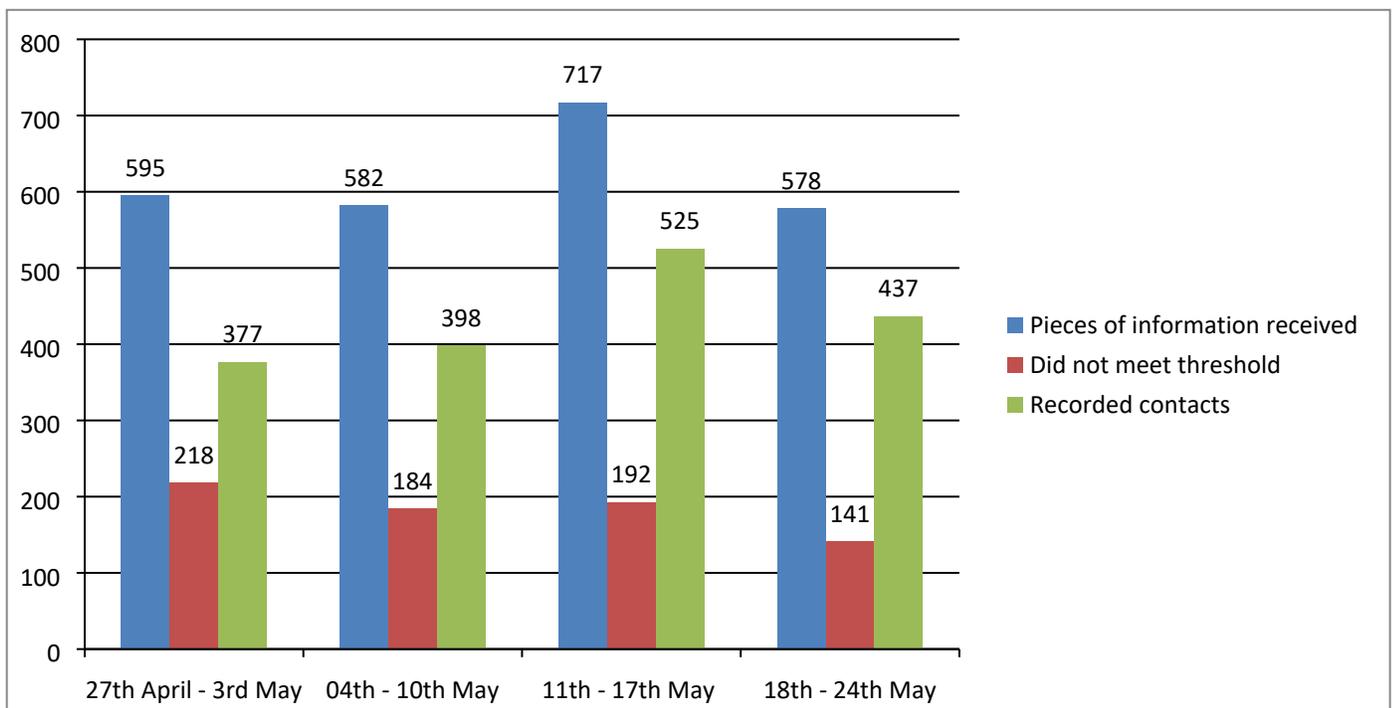
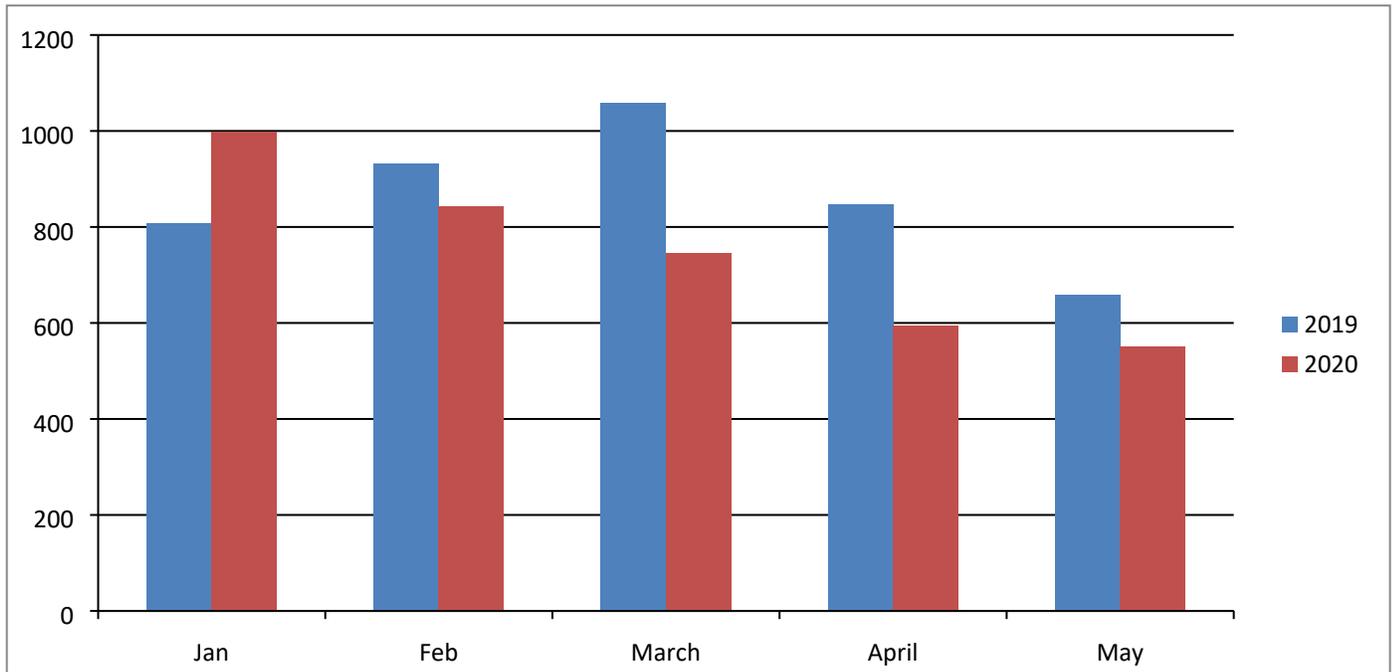
At the start of lockdown we made the decision that our children in care would not attend school. As the restrictions are being gradually relaxed and schools are starting to reopen it is important for us to review our position to ensure that our children in care are not unduly disadvantaged.

Therefore the position has now changed and children in care in the relevant year groups are now able to return to school subject to the views of their carers, social worker and school and their own wishes and feelings. This needs to be assessed on a case by case basis with regard to the level of need, any specific health risks etc.

## **Children in need of help and protection**

### **Referral rates**

The number of referrals to children's social care has gradually reduced since January. This reduction started prior to the Covid-19 lockdown. It is normally expected that referral rates will reduce between March and the summer before rising again however Covid-19 has inevitably led to a reduction in the overall number of referrals, with the level of direct contact partner agencies are having with children and families being significantly reduced. This is a similar picture in other local authorities across the country. We are now seeing a rise in the number of referrals as lockdown restrictions are relaxed and currently are predicting an increased level of demand due to the longer term impact of lockdown on issues such as domestic abuse, mental health and financial hardship.



## Early Help

Early help services have continued through lockdown, although visits have been required to comply with social distancing measures as with children in need and children at risk.

Where necessary families have been directed towards other support services including food hubs.

Covid-19 has inevitably had a significant impact on the delivery of group-based parenting programmes. These are now being delivered by video call and after a slow start the numbers of participants are gradually increasing.

The Outdoor Education Centres are currently closed. The nature of their work means that re-opening will present a challenge if social distancing is still required and plans are currently being considered for what a reopening of these services will look like.

Our parenting offer has been adapted from face to face groups to phone, video and virtual groups. Parents are offered 121 support over phone or video to complete our courses, or can join a virtual group of parents to do the course “live”. The team has been flexible offering evening sessions and groups which have been well- received by parents as the children are often in bed, giving time and space to complete.

Currently the prevention service has over 400 parents open, waiting or engaged. Just over 100 of those are having weekly sessions via 121 or groups, and 80 of those are having general wellbeing and support calls weekly. The remainder are awaiting a face to face group or do not want/aren't able to engage in sessions due to many reasons, including having the children present at home, making sessions a challenge. Of the 400+ cases, there are 225 children within those families open to CSC.

<b>Hub</b>	<b>LAC</b>	<b>CPP</b>	<b>CIN</b>	<b>Total</b>
East-In House	15	15	8	38
Keighley and Shipley In-House	14	16	4	34
South In-House	19	22	23	64
West-In House	27	48	14	89
<b>Total</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>225</b>

Family Links is our most popular course, and so far during Covid-19 we have had requests from parents and sent out 69 parenting puzzle books, 6 in Urdu, and 29 for those wanting to complete with our prevention workers.

For Freedom, our Domestic Abuse support course for women, we have sent out 27 books and given 49 new “log-ins” for the Freedom Online Course so they can do it in their own time, or can be referred to be supported to do this 121.

In relation to Cygnet, our parenting course for parents of children diagnosed with autism, we have set up 3 virtual groups and there are 18 parents booked to start our virtual online groups this month. We are planning more groups as these have been in huge demand and more accessible now they are in the evening and online.

### **Assessment of need**

These have continued as normal during lockdown although as with visits, our guidance to staff requires social distancing measures to be followed. There are currently 1438 assessments of need being undertaken across the service.

## Visits to children in the community

Guidance issued to staff at the start of lockdown advised that all visits should now follow social distancing guidelines. As a result workers have not been entering properties or getting closer than 2m unless this is essential for safeguarding purposes. Staff have been issued with PPE in order to undertake visits where social distancing is not possible.

In addition staff have been enabled to use video calls to supplement this.

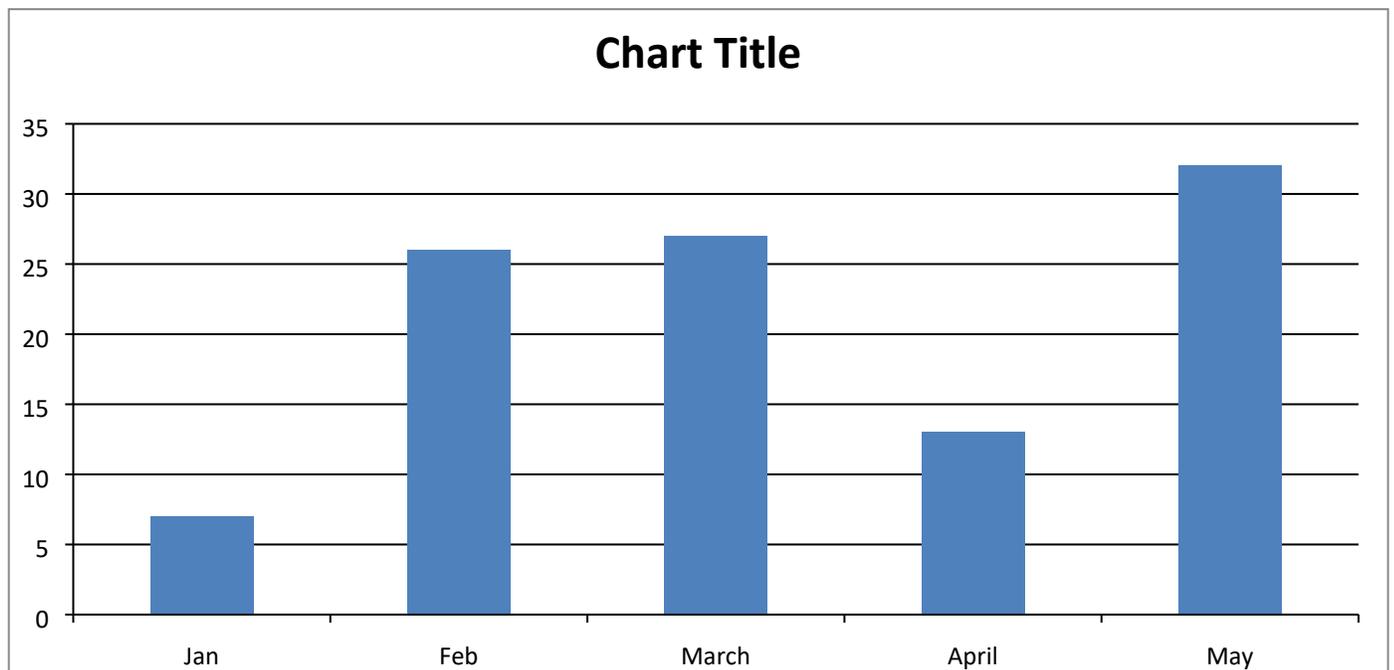
The virtual Covid-19 Team is now in place to undertake visits to families who are symptomatic or diagnosed with Covid-19 and where a physical visit is required for safeguarding purposes.

As can be seen from the graph at the start of this report Covid-19 has not adversely impacted our ability to see the children we work with. However the number of “face to face” contacts by mainstream social care teams has clearly reduced in line with guidelines with a higher proportion now being “virtual visits” unless there is a need for a physical visit to take place.

## Initial and emergency responses to children at risk of harm

During “lockdown” our staff have continued to respond to new referrals for children in need and those in need of protection including outside office hours. These services have continued to be delivered as normal during the outbreak and lockdown period.

The court system has also had to adjust to a new way of working, urgent cases have been prioritised thus enabling protective measures to be put in place swiftly where needed. However there have been inevitable delays in care proceedings perceived to be less urgent. As can be seen May has been a particularly busy month for applications to court.



## **Workforce issues**

The majority of operational children's social care staff were already equipped to be able to work from home however prior to the start of lockdown arrangements needed to be put in place for people who were not yet able to do this.

As indicated, our children's homes have continued to operate as normal. However in other parts of the service working from home has become the temporary norm, with the majority of social care staff, including social workers, managers, reviewing officers and business support working from home for the majority of the time and meetings being held virtually.

There has continued to be a reduced presence on site for the locality social work services due to the need to be able to respond to urgent "duty" issues and the size of the offices has enabled social distancing measures to be adhered to for those workers who have needed to enter the office. Large amounts of PPE have been distributed to teams.

We are currently in the process of beginning to plan the return to office based work however this is likely to be a gradual process over the next weeks and months subject to risk assessment and also in parallel with government guidance.

## **Recovery Action Plan**

We are now in the process of developing a Covid-19 recovery action plan which will detail how service delivery will begin to return to normal and how we will deal with the impact of the outbreak in the months to come.

Key areas of focus include:

- Since the start of lockdown the majority of staff have not been office based. Whilst this has largely worked well it is now time to start planning the gradual return to office-based work particularly for those staff for whom home-working has presented challenges. Inevitably this will require a cautious and planned approach to enable any adjustments to comply with social distancing measures for as long as this is required. All Heads of Service are now managing this process in their areas which will then enable priorities to be identified and plans to be made in line with individual circumstances and assessment of risk.
- Schools are now reopening for selected years on a limited basis. Until now we have taken the stance that our children in care will not attend school during the lockdown, due to the need to ensure that we protect our carers and placements from illness. However now that some schools are beginning to reopen we do have to review this position because we need to ensure that our children in care are not in any way disadvantaged by their care status. Therefore we now need to plan how children in care can safely return to education on a case by case basis in consultation with carers and their local schools.
- We are also now reviewing the provision of contact for children in care, which was suspended at the start of the lockdown. As the guidance on social distancing changes, it is important for our position on contact to also change to reflect this as long as this is safe for the child. Although no decision has been made as yet plans are being made in respect of a cautious reintroduction of contact for certain groups of children in care.
- In respect of face to face contact between social workers and children/families, this will continue to be guided by government guidance on social distancing. As indicated, it has been

“business as usual” in respect of how often children are seen however as the restrictions on face to face contact are lifted, the mechanism of this contact will change with a return to more face to face contact. However at present there are no plans for this to change in the immediate future.

- This will also apply to visits to foster carers by their supervising social workers
- Similarly, face to face meetings will not take place unless it is possible for social distancing measures to be followed.
- The multi-agency Covid-19 team has been a success so far and it is hoped that this team will be able to continue for as long as social distancing remains a requirement.
- Group-based parenting programmes will not be available until social distancing requirements no longer apply, due to the face to face nature of this work.
- We are currently considering how children’s and family’s needs may change post-Covid and identifying whether any existing services need to be enhanced including services related to domestic abuse and also post-Covid counselling for young people.

**Richard Fawcett**  
**Head of Service – South Locality**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> June 2020**