

Local Members Interest
N/A

Safe and Strong Communities Select Committee - Tuesday 07 July 2020

Response to COVID-19 for SCC Children and Families Services

Recommendations

I recommend that the Select Committee:

- a. Notes and endorses the approach taken to response;
- b. Endorses the approach to understanding the impact and risks associated with the COVID-19 response.

Report of Cllr Mark Sutton, Cabinet Member for Children and Young People

Summary

What is the Select Committee being asked to do and why?

1. This paper details the approach that Staffordshire County Council's Children and Family services have taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It identifies the high-level impacts of COVID-19 on our children and family services, the commissioned providers and education settings during the period of 24 March 2020 to 28 May 2020 when the decision to begin the easing of restrictions took place.
2. It also describes the learning from the response phase, the high-level impacts, risks and progress whilst transitioning into the recovery phase.

Report

Background

3. On Monday 23 March 2020 the Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced to the nation that the COVID-19 virus was expected to reach unprecedented levels and was at that of a pandemic. The government took the step of initiating a full lockdown of activities and social movement in order to attempt to contain and mitigate the predicted impact.
4. It is the biggest, longest, deepest peacetime emergency we have ever faced, and it is unlikely the world will ever be the same again – it has changed in ways we could not have anticipated.
5. It is acknowledged that the public health measures that have been put in place to manage this (social distancing, infection prevention and control) will be with us for

some time and “going back to normal” is not an option in the short or medium term.

6. The impact and measures required to manage this in support of children and their families in Staffordshire required a range of decisions and changes to the operating functions in order to maintain safe service delivery.
7. Staffordshire County Council (SCC) initiated its response to the COVID-19 pandemic with twice daily Incident Management Team (IMT) meetings to co-ordinate and manage the response, Kate Sharratt (Assistant Director for Improvement and Development) and Tim Moss (Assistant Director for Education Strategy and Improvement) represented the children and families service. The council's senior leadership team created a 'Gold Command' function which sits weekly. The Local Resilience Forum (LRF), a partnership of local agencies, held a strategic co-ordinating group twice weekly to co-ordinate the multi-agency response.
8. As of 28 May 2020, there have been more than 265,227 confirmed cases in the UK, with deaths of 37,048 and 2,207 confirmed cases in Staffordshire. As of 8 June, we are now experiencing a decline in both the number of confirmed cases and the death rate. However, this is dependent upon the continuing observance and success of control measures.

Response to Covid-19

9. Throughout the period outlined it should be recognised that from the Department of Education, Public Health England and other regulatory and statutory bodies there were over 200 pieces of new, additional and amended pieces of guidance. Core statutory legislative changes were also made to the Children and Families Act and easements to the SEND Code of Practice. All required assimilation and local interpretation prior to being communicated to staff, partners, education settings and commissioned providers. List available at Appendix 1
10. To support managers from across the children and families system a daily opportunity to discuss issues, risks and identify solutions was quickly formed to discuss emerging themes and issues. This was well received and enabled key decisions to be highlighted, discussed and agreed in real time.
11. The levels of staff commitment and resilience throughout the period is evidenced by the levels of those available for work being maintained at circa 86%. Only a small number of staff were shielding or were required to self-isolate, whilst 60% of staff were available to conduct home visits. Opportunities to access development activities have been transformed to webinar, e-learning and other virtual platforms in support of the workforce adapting to new ways of working.
12. A revised children's social care operating model was implemented in the week commencing 23 March 2020 which saw a significant proportion of the workforce begin to work from home following the government advice to stay at home wherever possible, and they made best use of the ICT kit made available to them.

13. Details of the operating model can be found at Appendix 2. In summary new guidelines were developed to ensure that all children known to a social worker for Child in Need, Child Protection or were in Local Authority care had an up to date risk assessment to ensure that those children deemed to be most at risk were seen (either face to face or virtually). This was also reflected in a decision to move family time (court directed) to a range of virtual opportunities.
14. Staffordshire schools switched to providing remote education for most children and young people but remained open to support vulnerable children and children of essential key workers. Currently around 2.8% of all children are in school. We quickly established a process for identifying vulnerable children not in contact with their education settings. Where this was the case contact was established with those remaining at home, to seek assurance that appropriate safeguarding and support remained in place for those in need. Data returns indicate that on average nearly 20% of children with a social worker were attending school. The vast majority that remained at home were being contacted by their school.
15. Approximately 52% of all early year's settings remained open to provide places for vulnerable children and children of critical workers. We swiftly pulled together a 'project' team to respond to the crisis. This ensured brokerage to support 132 critical worker families (175 children in total) to find alternative provision, daily 'Teams' meetings to manage issues and monitor the sector response and developed online surveys to monitor attendance. When capacity began to reduce in places for under 3s (Private Nurseries and Childminders) we acted swiftly to offer interim financial support to ensure places were protected. We were therefore able to ensure that every critical worker needing childcare was able to receive it during the lockdown period.
16. Children centres were closed following government guidance and have remained closed except for the emergency childcare which has been operating throughout in some districts. Staff moved quickly to support the emergency locality teams and broker childcare and education places for families. After this initial support was provided, they established virtual family hubs and supported the roll out of our approach to vulnerable families. Details of which can be found in paragraphs 25 – 29.
17. The residential, foster care and supported accommodation market has been stable for the last two months. There has been a downturn in residential placements and although there has been some limited capacity this has been managed effectively. This has been reflected across the West Midlands region. However, we continue to place and are faced with the normal placement pressures to find the most appropriate placement to meet children's individual needs. The supported accommodation sector has continued to be managed and providers have been working well to accommodate the current demand and are keeping children post 18 until housing associations are back to usual allocations.
18. The Fostering service maintained the core business of recruiting and retaining foster carers, switching quickly to digital solutions. The process of fostering enquiry to fostering approval has remained stable and the digital recruitment strategy has increased the numbers of enquiries and interest over this period. Live

Facebook events being particularly well received. Existing foster carers have been supported by social workers through virtual meetings for supervision, training, and stability meetings. Fostering panels have also operated on a digital platform. Statutory checks have been completed and local arrangements have been made to ensure that most fostering medicals are fully completed prior to foster carers becoming approved. A 'lock down allowance', equivalent to the summer holiday payment has been made to carers and some special guardians to support the education of children at home as well as the extra household expenditure.

19. Commissioned providers were supported from the outset to ensure that their viability continued and that they were able to adapt. Most providers quickly adapted their services and offered virtual methods of support and continued where needed with face to face delivery following PHE guidance.
20. A core set of data indicators were established for the impact of the service changes to be monitored and ensure safe decisions have been made. These included data such as:
 - a. Contacts and referrals received at first response
 - b. Referrals with an indicator of Domestic Abuse
 - c. Overall children allocated to a social worker
 - d. Children seen / Foster carers seen
 - e. Youth offending
 - f. Children have had their plan reviewed
 - g. S47 initiated

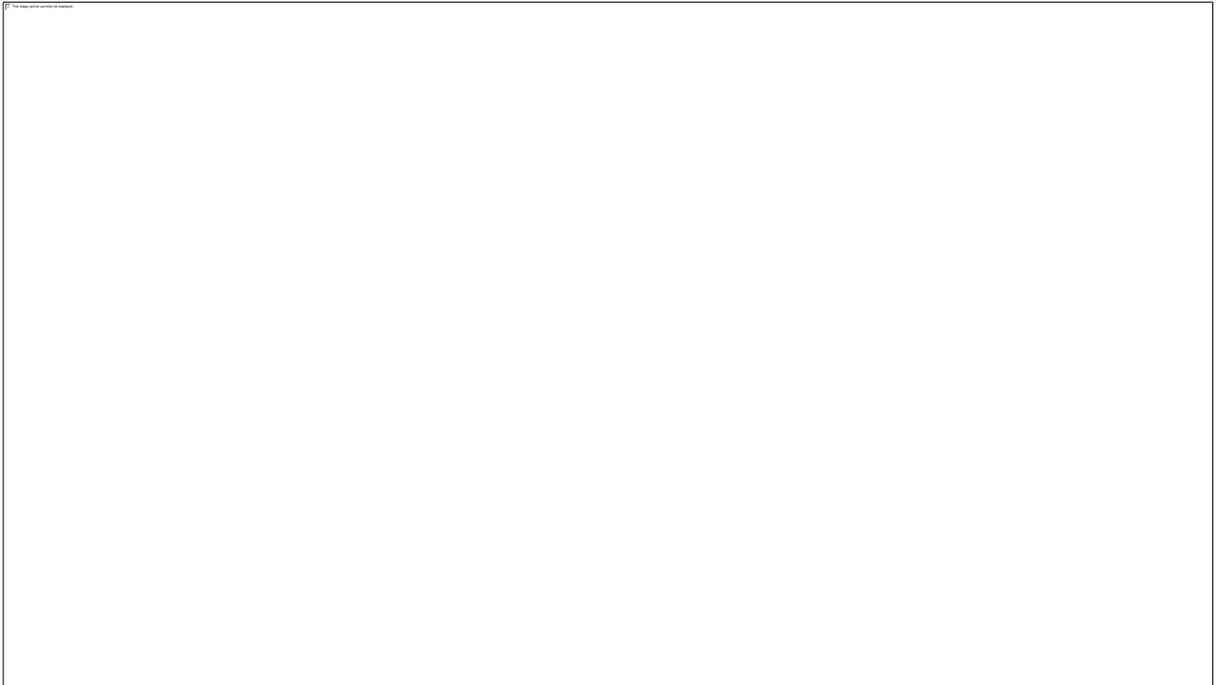
Our most recent analysis/findings have shown that:

- a. The number of children being referred is returning and stabilising at pre lock down levels.
- b. The number of children going missing was 25 (23 children) and seems to have returned to pre locked down levels.
- c. The number of children allocated to a social worker has stabilised

A fuller report is attached at Appendix 3 for information

21. Each week the service monitored the proportion of children referred where domestic abuse (DA) was identified as a factor. This may include low level cases, or where domestic abuse was expected but not confirmed. Overall, since the start of the COVID-19 restrictions, the proportion of children with domestic abuse identified as a referral factor increased above the 12-month average. However, the proportions are affected by the reduction in the overall number of children being referred as the actual number of children remained unchanged until the start of May when restrictions started to ease.
22. From a multi-agency perspective, there has been close monitoring of DA via a partnership group which was established at the beginning of COVID 19. This group has assessed the risks and worked together to mitigate them. This has included but is not limited to:

- a. Holding virtual drop in sessions,
 - b. Developing approaches for known victims,
 - c. Working with the Home Office to develop safe places to disclose DA,
 - d. Applying for and increasing the funding available for support services and
 - e. Working collaboratively to ensure volunteers were able to support pressures in the system
23. Throughout this period, it was recognised that out of necessity the transformation of the children's system would need to slow due to the impact of Covid-19 on officer time and focus. However, when possible work has progressed.
24. The government has so far assigned £3.2bn for local government in their response to COVID-19, of which SCC will receive c £38m. Of that allocation Children and Families is currently expecting to incur additional exceptional spend of circa £1.3m in response to the pandemic, although the estimated cost to the services is considerably higher at circa £6.6m due to the delayed delivery of planned savings of c£4.8m and lost income of c £0.5m.



25. Children and Families is, so far, forecast to incur additional exceptional spend of c £1.3m in response to the coronavirus outbreak for example to support providers that have seen reduced demand for services, additional support for our foster carers, and additional care package costs to ensure the most vulnerable are protected and that, in the longer term, business continuity and market sustainability is assured:

	Forecast £m
<u>Childrens Services</u>	
Annual Leave Buy Back scheme for critical workers	0.039
Additional care package costs and direct payments to support children with disabilities living at home	0.300
Additional S17 payments for those on edge of care to keep them safe	0.050
Post 18 funding for care leavers who would have been allocated housing but not possible as housing providers have ceased allocations.	0.065
Extra IT for early help workers (smartphones)	0.020
Additional foster carer support	0.180
General spend (cleaning supplies, catering provisions, etc)	0.040
Overtime duty staff	0.050
Additional support packages to some vulnerable placements	0.015
Standby arrangements with Entrust for additional looked after provision at larches wood	0.030
	<u>0.789</u>
 <u>Education Services</u>	
Additional SEND transport e.g. as a result of sole occupancy, Easter transport	0.040
Alternative Provision support	0.150
Incentive payments for early years providers	0.300
School place appeals will have to be undertaken virtually	0.010
Casual / Zero hour contracts - committed hours	0.039
	<u>0.539</u>
 Total Additional Exceptional Spend	 <u><u>1.328</u></u>

26. Due to several other statutory bodies also having to alter their operating model or close services altogether we have identified several backlogs within the system which will impact on our ability to complete and progress key outcomes for children and young people. This includes 19 children who are eligible for independent housing provision, remaining in supported accommodation funded by the Local Authority due to housing providers stopping all new allocations during lockdown; over 30 children who we would have expected to have exited the care system through adoption orders, care order discharges and special guardianship orders have remained children in our care due to the closure of courts for anything other than urgent safeguarding cases.

Mitigation

27. SCC's ICT department has worked tirelessly to enable exponential change, connectivity and access to a variety of platforms for the children and families services. This access and agility has enabled a shift from face to face working with families to a comprehensive digital offer. This involved enabling What's App; Skype; Facetime; Facebook groups; Microsoft teams.

28. SCC health, safety and wellbeing team worked with the business support team in each district to ensure that there was sufficient and effective PPE distribution for front-line practitioners from the beginning of lockdown, this has undoubtedly supported the safe delivery of services and maintained confidence within the staffing group. This offer has been extended to support education settings; early years, schools and post 16; foster carers; and any child who requires personal care.

29. The iCount SCC volunteers programme has also provided support: to the creation of PPE packs for a huge range of providers; a number of staff volunteers to ensure that the Domestic Abuse refuges across Staffordshire could remain open and accessible.
30. Building upon the existing Place Based Approach a supporting vulnerable families programme has been developed to enhance the community response to those families most in need,
31. Families were identified using a range of data and information that indicated these families were financially excluded and therefore at greater risk during COVID. The numbers are outlined below.

District	Number of children	SEND
Cannock	333	85
South Staffordshire	168	37
Stafford	308	72
Newcastle Under Lyme	396	67
East Staffordshire	439	85
Lichfield	176	53
Staffordshire Moorlands	194	33
Tamworth	303	62
Total	2317	494

32. These packs were funded by the Community Foundation (£15,000), Staffordshire County Council members (£1803) and the remaining balance by Staffordshire County Council.
33. “Thank you very much for our survival pack, it’s the **first time my child has smiled** in six weeks, it has kept them busy all day.” Mum, Cannock.
34. A range of families also sought community support. This included but was not limited to:
- Sourcing a new fridge freezer – this was accessed via Winshill neighbourhood resources centre and a contact at Trent and Dove.
 - Food parcels via local foodbanks.
 - Sourcing laptops for children
 - Alice Charity providing cleaning packs
 - Source clothes for children from Rising Brook Church and Staffordshire baby bank.
 - Secured school places for children with SEND
 - Supported accessing emotional wellbeing support for parents.

Of the families contacted 511 have engaged with the newly established Facebook Family Hubs.

35. To prevent placement breakdown and promote stability for placements a contract was brokered with Entrust to utilise the Laches Wood outdoor education centre in South Staffordshire for short breaks. This provision has been accessed by over 20

children and young people and none of these placements have broken down. Both the children and their carers have commented on the value and space it has given to them.

36. Working closely with Early Years 12 childminding families were identified who can provide additional care for children 0-18 years offering overnight care for up to 28 days. This resource has supported placements made by the Emergency Duty Service and has provided short breaks for fostering families when they have been necessary. This resource has the potential to be expanded further to provide overnight care for 'children in need' under section 17 of the Children Act 1989.
37. Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire Safeguarding Children's Board (SSSCB) completed a comprehensive risk assessment with a range of other providers from across the children's system to give assurance that children were safe and being seen. This is available at Appendix 4.
38. Communications with staff, partners and schools has been effective and well received; this has enabled key messages to be shared across the children and families system. A variety of methods have also been utilised such as webinar, videos, Facebook live chats and YouTube clips. This has meant that children, families and staff have had access to share their thoughts and feelings around concerns or sharing of good practice.
39. During the initial phases of response to COVID-19 there was a focus on statutory social work and the initial operating model stopped taking early help referrals, however this was under constant review and referrals for early help were re-started on 14 April 2020.
40. We developed interim emergency locality teams (ELTs) which provided district support to schools and families during the crisis. The ELTs ensured 'one conversation' with schools and provided support to manage issues. The teams also helped monitor supply, demand and helped to facilitate 'hub' arrangements where required. Through these teams we ensured there was a consistent approach from early years through to post-16 including SEND provision. The ELTs also provided a mechanism for wider discussions about 'support' for vulnerable families during lockdown, ensuring those in need were able to get the help they required.

Recovery

41. As detailed in Appendix 5 (SCC COVID-19 Planning and Recovery Group), each directorate is leading recovery for its own area, and cross cutting themes being led through recovery groups linked to the four principles – communities, digital, people and climate change. Any coordination of activity required is managed through the SCC Planning and Recovery Group.
42. The high level and immediate priorities for the Families and Communities Directorate are appended at Appendix 6 and are being monitored through a range of workstreams against a set of core indicators and deliverables to support evidence-based decision making in an ever-changing landscape.

43. Demand analysis is being developed nationally, regionally and locally of the children and families services to recover its services for the immediate and longer term. Early indicators would suggest that there is likely to be some increase in demand and through the recovery work this is being monitored closely in order to assess the impact on service delivery and the outcomes for children.
44. Many of the initiatives and methods of working have been recognised as adding value to our approach. Learning will be taken from the changes made to inform future service planning, delivery and transformation.
45. Feedback from children, young people and families will continue to be recognised in the shaping of the recovery of services and some comments are shared below which reflect the views:

My social worker is doing a FaceTime with me and my sister every week to make sure we are all right and supported”

“Social keeping in touch and CICC and also teachers and parents at Home”

“I’m in constant touch with my social worker by video link also got a lot of love and support from my foster family”

List of Background Documents/Appendices:

- Appendix 1 – COVID Guidance for Children’s Services Departments 06-20
- Appendix 2 – Children’s Services Operating Model
- Appendix 3 – Children’s and Families COVID Data
- Appendix 4 – SSSCP(B) Recovery
- Appendix 5 – SCC Planning and Recovery Group Terms of Reference
- Appendix 6 – Families and Communities Recovery, Immediate Priorities

Contact Details

Report Author: Kate Sharratt
Job Title: Assistant Director for Improvement and Development
Telephone No.: 01785 895974
E-Mail Address: katherine.sharratt@staffordshire.gov.uk