

REPORT TO: Children, Young People & Families
Policy & Performance Board

DATE: 20th July 2020

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, People

PORTFOLIO: Children, Education & Social Care

SUBJECT: Support for Children and Families during COVID 19

WARD(S) All

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 To provide members of the Board with an update on support provided to children and families during COVID 19.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION: That:

i) Members note the contents of the report.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 Introduction

3.1.1 Although most staff have been working from home, throughout the lockdown the iCART has been in operation and there has been a rota of social work staff in the office ready to respond to any immediate safeguarding concerns. Similarly, early help staff have been operating from children centres and providing day care when needed along with other forms of family support either virtually or by visiting and observing social-distancing guidance.

3.1.2 All children in care, care leavers and those children with a child protection plan were risk assessed at the beginning of COVID and contact has been maintained either virtually or when deemed necessary by a physical visit.

3.1.3 We have provided up to date information on vulnerable children to the DfE as part of eth national monitoring programme.

3.1.4 Staff have been working hard throughout the period, and innovative ways of working with and supporting families were quickly established. This informal report summarises some of the key activities that have taken place since 23rd March 2020.

3.1.5 Set out below are summaries for each service area.

3.2 **Early Help Services**

3.2.1 Early Help and family support have pulled together a comprehensive suite of activities and a full report is available as annex to this report with family comments, examples of work for the Locality Teams include:

- Direct work sessions in local parks/wellbeing walks.
- Video calls with children to obtain wishes and feelings/complete CAF pack/direct work.
- Video calls with parents to complete parenting work, observe home conditions and complete CAF pack.
- CAF's held virtually; especially useful for parents with mental health issues as they feel more comfortable and may not feel able to attend in person under usual circumstances.
- Emailing resources, including links to useful websites to provide both educational resources and fun activities - Direct work completed via online platforms.
- Encouraging families to explore the outdoors in a safe and fun way, in line with government guidelines.
- Advice and guidance to support parents in managing the children at home in a positive environment.
- Offering emotional support on the phone and then been sending out the nurture resources to use at home and talk through with staff to implement measures.
- Support parents and young people to access support for their mental health during lockdown including Voice recordings made of relaxation exercises and stress busters sent via WhatsApp.
- Provided practical support for parents struggling financially through foodbanks and community shop and connecting them with local organisations providing food and other essentials and benefit issues.
- Providing physical resources for those who struggle to access online activities.
- Staff have been out for walks with young people and parents with young children which enables them to talk more freely without worrying about neighbours overhearing.
- Provide information on how to stay safe, how to occupy their family, how to establish routines and deal with conflict.
- Coordinate Multi Agency working remotely to ensure that plans of support are put in place and reviewed.
- Social distanced meetings held on school premises use of desks to appropriately position attendees.
- Support those with young families balancing lockdown life alongside the job and home schooling – particularly those of other key workers.

3.2.2 Halton Children Centre's (CC)

- Phone call support, families really benefitted from this as they reported feeling isolated. Increased the phone contact for single parent families in response to this. Families responded well to this and were very open to providing information about their issues & concerns.
- CAF/CiN meetings virtually
- One to One nurture via video/phone calls
- Play and positive interaction ideas and resources delivered to families
- Door step visits to families.
- Welcome screenings completed via telephone calls/video calls where possible.
- Supplied and delivered emergency food supplies.
- Play partners telephone support – this has been challenging as it would normally be delivered in the home and is about modelling good interactions. See more detailed report below on how we have developed it to be done virtually.
- HELPs service continuing and amended to fit in with covid regulations (see in detail below)
- Themed play bags to support child development and positive interactions – these have been planned in line with children's development and delivered to families homes.
- Easter Egg donations delivered to families
- Social media posts to signpost families, interact with them and keep families engaged.
- Online celebration of Book Trusts Pyjamarama
- Staff 'Keeping in touch' video
- Online Nursery Rhyme Competition
- Sunflower competition supported by local garden centre
- Facilitating CSC contacts
- Support with equipment - FNP
- Support Asylum Families

3.2.3 Halton HELPS (Home Safety Equipment)

- Free provision of equipment for vulnerable families
- Home safety checks by professionals done via telephone
- Range of home safety reminder posts on CC and HELPS Facebook pages – this was important as accidents in the home increased due to lockdown

3.3 **Disabled Children's Services (DCS)**

- 3.3.1 Halton's Disabled Children Service works across the Borough providing Short Breaks Services to families of disabled children. We commission a range of short breaks services, complete

assessments, coordinate and review support packages and conduct parent carer needs assessments.

3.3.2 Since lockdown, the majority of our Short Breaks services have been suspended but our Providers have and our service have worked creatively to provide a service;

- Maintained weekly contact with families to provide advice and reassurance.
- We have developed a hub and spoke model where all of the families have had weekly contact via phone, text, email, Skype and Zoom from at least one agency
- DCS staff have provided advice and support on access to food, medication, behaviour management and activities etc.
- DCS have worked with the agencies to explore creative ways of alternative support including online activities and the purchase of toys and activities.
- Families who have access to support via a Personal Budget have been able to maintain a service if their Personal Assistant is available for work but if not we have supported them to use some funds in alternative ways as a temporary measure.
- We are currently working with Commissioners and commissioned services to establish a plan to phase in the return of services following appropriate risk assessments and discussions with families. During the next 3 months, whilst we anticipate that there will be more face to face delivery, this is still going to be significantly less than would usually be provided in the summer period. Providers are also planning how they might further extend their services in the autumn until Christmas. Further information will be provided on Halton's Local Offer website <https://localoffer.haltonchildrenstrust.co.uk/leisure/>

3.3.3 Health Engagement Service

- Pre-CAF's completed via phone contact, found that parents were able to use this time to really discuss their child at length, this also helped them to give thought to the impact on them and their family as a whole.
- Provided relevant advice and practical resources for families and young people. Emailing resources and useful links to appropriate websites to address the issues raised in referral from GP.
- Advice and guidance offered over the phone to support parents and family through the corona lockdown enabling them to cope a little better at home.
- Offering emotional support over the phone using listening skills to enable appropriate response to their situation and provide containment to families during this difficult time.
- Regular contact with families to offer support and families also

encouraged to contact Health Engagement Officer if they felt they needed support via phone, text, email ensuring communication was effective and appropriate for the family and their needs.

- Liaising with other support agencies to ensure consistency for the family such as:
CAMHS/Woodveiw/Chatterbug/Disability/school head teachers/ GP's and surgery support staff, this enable's linked up working and provides a better support system for the young person and family.
- Developed a range of resources, books, useful websites and information on a variety of key themes to support children, young people and their families including self-help information. These resources were also shared with colleagues within Halton Borough Council to benefit a wider catchment of families to ensure information was disseminated and families have access to information and advice online.
- Sent out resource worksheets covering many different issues to help them with behaviour/emotions/routines/boundaries etc. which could be accessed at home by families during lockdown.
- Liaising with GP practices to ensure they were aware of how the Health Engagement service has adapted to support families during COVID 19.
- Promoted using outdoor activities to improve wellbeing and have fun with family.
- Arranged and delivered food parcels to parents who were struggling financially during this period.
- Regular catch-up skype meetings with our manager and team to maintain staff support and ensure we are all fine with the cases we have open and ask any questions we would like help with and for Manager to update us with the latest HBC and Gov. Covid advice/guidance, we find this is extremely important.
- Maintained contact and support with some teenagers via email or text.
- Kept some families open longer than usually would to allow time for them to try resources we suggested.
- Completed online training regarding physiological first aid to Covid.

3.4 Daycare at Warrington Road and Ditton

- 3.4.1 Ditton Early years Centre and Warrington road Bambini nurseries are local authority daycare, during lock down they continued to provide a service for keyworker children, vulnerable children and now a phase reopening for the wider community. Alongside nursery provision they provided activity packs for children stories read by the different members of staff, made welfare calls, through Facebook stories were read by the different members of staff to families and groups.

3.5 **Safeguarding and Children in Care**

Children In Need and Child Protection

- iCART – initially saw a reduction in the number of contacts/ referrals – this has increased week on week, with the numbers now returning to the amount previously received pre COVID-19. iCART have predominantly worked from home, some workers are working from home due to staff isolating/shielding. Other agencies remain working from home, police have remained present in the office on an ad hoc basis. Daily conference calls are held with all staff and agencies to ensure iCART are working effectively in line with policy and procedures and maintaining a multi-agency approach. iCART have experienced an influx of agency requests for information – this may evidence agencies are ensuring they are gathering relevant information to inform their work and to safeguard children and young people as they were not being seen as frequently by universal services.
- Tools for referral – in response to surge planning and to ensure the information being provided by agencies informs the decisions made, we have developed and launched the use of screening tools to be completed and submitted with Child in Need referrals/contacts or on open cases to evidence areas for support.
- Supervised contact for children in care – unfortunately during lockdown, contact stopped between children and their parents/carers in line with government guidance. We have constantly reviewed the position with regards to contact and have continued to moved forward in line with the developing guidance. We are currently undertaking contact outdoors with families, this remains reduced due to the availability of appropriate venues with outside facilities.
- Virtual Contact - throughout the pandemic children have continued to have contact via virtual means i.e. Facetime etc. This has proved to be positive for a number of children and young people, who have reported they feel more comfortable and it is less intrusive into their time. The majority of parents have been extremely understanding with the measures in place and some are also reporting it has been positive. Foster carers have supervised a number of the virtual contacts, these contacts provide a lot more detail for the parents with the foster carers talking about what the child has been doing, what they like to eat etc.
- PPE – throughout the pandemic we have ensured all staff have

appropriate access to PPE.

- Duty Workers - the majority of staff in the Child in Need Teams have been, and continue to work from home. We have ensured appropriate levels of staff have remained in the office to respond to Section 47's and Duty Visits. On a daily basis there is 1 Principal Manager; 2 Practice Leads; 4 Social Workers and 2 Community Support Workers present in the office. This enables an effective response to safeguarding concerns and ensure staff are safeguarded and appropriate social distancing is in place.
- "Bubbles" – as a result of the easing of the restrictions, working "Bubbles" have been introduced, this ensures the same staff work on a rota basis of staff being present in the office, that is, 1 week in the office 2/3 weeks at home. This is to ensure if a member of staff exhibits symptoms or is tested positive, that "Bubble" can then leave the office and work from home and would not have had any contact with people from the other 2/3 "Bubbles".
- Temporary Assessment Team – as a result of COVID-19 we have seen an increase in Social Work caseloads, it is also anticipated, when universal services return full time there will be a surge in referrals/contacts. We have been proactive in planning for the surge, we are in the process of appointing a temporary assessment team. The team will receive the referral from iCART and undertake the SAP, only cases that progress to a plan will be transferred to the CIN Teams. This will ensure a timely assessment is undertaken and will support staff and enable them the time to review their caseloads and progress plans and closures effectively and efficiently.
- COVID-19 Risk Assessment – from the beginning of lockdown, all cases were reviewed and a COVID-19 Risk Assessment undertaken on all cases. This assured us the frequency and mechanism of visiting the child had been considered with management oversight, with increased visiting agreed if required. All cases were RAG rated to ensure we considered the current risk due to the closure of universal services. The Risk Assessment is also reviewed regularly in line with changes in circumstances and the child's plan. We have continued to work closely and effectively with education to ensure vulnerable children continue to attend school.

3.6 Children in Care and Care Leavers

- 3.6.1 • On a weekly basis all Social Workers and Personal Advisors review all children and young people and appropriately RAG rate them dependent upon their need and send to the Divisional Manager.

- A vulnerable care leaver spreadsheet is updated based on the above RAG details and on a weekly basis and is sent to DCS, OD and EDT for information.
- All panels still running re Emotional health and wellbeing, Care leaver's accommodation group, placement panel etc.
- Re-instigated new residential to foster care project and cohort of children.
- All cases have a COVID statutory visits risks assessment on file which are subject to review
- The service has worked collaboratively to stabilise placements, with only three placements disruptions.
- We have ensured that those young people leaving care at 18 have been able to remain in their care placements whilst plans for move on accommodation is explored due to delays as a result of COVID19.
- PA's have continued to support young people to transition into their own accommodation when the need has arisen and we have commissioned floating support for a number of care leavers to ensure young people are supported at this difficult time.
- The Council's shared accommodation is now successfully furnished following its refurbishment. The four bedroomed facility will be subject to impending risk assessment for potential opening and commissioning the running of the service
- We have transitioned children on to their adoptive placements to prevent any drift in the child's life. Whilst this has been challenging and a balancing act in respect of ensuring the safety of the child, fostering household, adoptive household and our staff, four children have been placed in their adoptive placement since March 2020.
- Children and young people are beginning to have contact with their families outdoors, in the community for short amounts of time when safe to do so. Risk Assessments are being completed and discussions are held with foster carers/residential staff, SSW, child's SW and CSW to inform this Assessment to ensure that it is safe and appropriate for contact to take place. Foster carers and parents have been provided with guidance in respect how contact will be managed and with clear expectations for parents. So far, for those children and young people who have had face to face contact, this has gone well.
- CICC still meeting virtually on a fortnightly basis to discuss significant issues and service delivery. Some members of the children in care council have recently been involved in the recruitment of a PA's for the team.
- Over 200 DFE laptops have been delivered to CIC&CL.
- The service has successfully implemented a skeleton rota with a new 'bubble rota' operational for 4 weeks now to further limit the potential spreads of the virus and in response to creating an outbreak plan.

- PIMMS meeting still occurring weekly, PIMMS improving and I've got a virtual performance clinic booked in for early July
- All supervisions are up to date across service.
- DM continues to chair management meeting booked in fortnightly- including finance and budget overview.
- Service wide team meetings occur three weekly, in the interim POPD meetings continue to be held every morning between the PL and their staff.
- Weekly audits evidencing compliance and CIC continue to update COVID stat visits risk assessments based on changing needs of child and circumstances, which is resulting on more face to face visits.

3.7 **Fostering Service**

- 3.7.1
- Fostering Panel has run consistently since crisis started with only a 2 week delay on March panel to allow us to action 'virtual' arrangements. Between panels in March, April, May and June we have discussed and approved -6 new Mainstream households, 2 new Connected Person households, approved 4 Long Term matches with our CIC and carers and agreed 2 changes of approval for foster carers
 - July panel has – 1 Mainstream household, 2 connected people households and 1 LT match to be considered.
 - Fostering have also recruited to 2 FT vacancies during lockdown.
 - The service have completed 53 viability assessments with CIN colleagues and there are 16 joint fostering/SGO assessments either ongoing or completed.

3.8 **Inglefield**

- 3.8.1
- Inglefield short breaks unit had to be closed due to high level of vulnerability of children who access the service. However, we have completed a Risk registrar of all children who access the service, Risk assessment of staff and the building and we are planning to safely open for day care initially before moving to resuming overnight short breaks.
 - Staff have kept regular telephone/FaceTime/email contact as appropriate to each child and their family's needs, offering support, advice, signposting when appropriate and sometimes 'just to listen'. In addition to helping families with provisions and the collection/delivery food and essential supplies.
 - A post card with photos of all the staff team and some encouraging words was sent individually to all our young people which was well received.

3.9 **Placements Team**

- 3.9.1
- Overarching_Immediate processing and authorisation of all invoices to ensure earliest possible payments to aid cash flow – this will revert back to usual process as of 20th July in line with authority payment terms.
 - SEND OOB pupils - risk assessments completed for children in out of borough settings and maintained contact with schools having regular discussions about the status of children and how schools support children to come return.
 - Social Care placements – planned contractual monitoring visits are in the process of starting again , linked to a an agreed risk assessment – process has been reviewed.
 - Social Care placements – sub regional work across Liverpool City Region relating to a localised contractual framework has continued during lockdown – a full provider consultation exercise has been completed and tender goes out mid-July for Residential and Fostering placements in the external sector.
 - Placements North West - We have utilised the regularly updated data provided by Placements North West from the providers on the regional Flexible Purchasing System (framework).
 - A total of 542 Children’s Homes are provided with a daily opportunity to report on key measures relating to the impact and management of COVID-19 (most within the North West, some – included on our Flexible Purchasing System – may be within 20miles of region’s borders or more specialist ‘at a distance’ provision). 462 or 85% of homes have provided a full or partial response, of these - 10% are closed to new referrals (this may not be COVID-19 related) and 72% report there are no available placements.

3.10 **Educational Outcomes and effective practice for Children in Care and Care Leavers**

- 3.10.1
- Despite the challenges of different working conditions and environments good levels of communication between social care, schools and Virtual school have continued throughout this uncertain period.
 - Ensure that despite the current situation there is no drift for a number of children and young people where applications for an EHCP need to be made or they are undergoing statutory assessment. This has been facilitated by the PEP Coordinators and by our commissioned EP support.
 - Any educational or pastoral concerns have been raised with the Virtual School in a timely manner from either schools or social care so that any issues can be dealt with swiftly.
 - The Virtual School website has been enhanced and regularly

updated with covid-19 guidance from the DfE; curriculum links, particularly Maths and English and other subject support/resources to support learning at home; other activities to support carers in keeping children and young people engaged in their learning such as virtual tours of museums, cross curricular activities, coding projects, arts & craft ideas, fun ideas from famous authors etc. A new section with ideas and resources to support Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing has also been added. We are looking to develop a more interactive learning section so that children and young people can remain active in their learning at home in the future.

3.11 **Personal Education Plans**

- 3.11.1
- PEPs have successfully moved to a virtual format with all key professionals, and where appropriate children and young people, taking part in conference calls and so the PEPs have continued to be completed in a timely manner.
 - PEPs have provided a clear mechanism to address any concerns foster carers have had in supporting children and young people with their education at home and in reducing anxieties around children and young people returning to school.
 - PEPs have focused on identifying interventions to support transition of young people back into education settings and have allowed schools to plan ahead including providing any extra support required to facilitate reintegration. This has included virtual tours of school prior to a child or young person's return and arranging bespoke visits for our Y6 pupils who are moving to Secondary schools.
 - Pupil Premium Plus has continued to be available to schools to support the learning of children and young people and in particular has been used to maintain key mentor support for some children when in school.

3.11.2 **Encouraging and Maintaining School Attendance /Access to learning:-**

- The Virtual School has been proactive in encouraging all our children and young people in care to access school throughout this period in line with DfE guidance. The PEP Coordinators in particular have provided a bridge of communication and facilitation between schools, carers and social workers and they have coordinated bespoke planned returns to school. This is regardless of where the child is placed or being educated.
- Virtual School have been working with carers and schools to ensure that CIC have been able to access to online during COVID 19.
- Learning resources that had previously been identified for children and young people have continued to be provided – for example, Storytime magazine subscriptions have continued to be

sent out to children aged 5-9 who were identified as needing extra support with reading.

- The Virtual School was in the process of launching a digital learning platform (Anspear/Nimbl) which was being targeted at specific children and young people and their carers. This could not happen in the planned way so our Education Support Worker has been contacting each carer and young person individually to ensure that they're set up on the system and can access both curriculum materials for the child/young person and also education based professional development modules for the carers. Initial feedback from carers is that it's something they can use in addition to the school work being set and children are finding the interactive resources engaging.

3.12 **Safeguarding Unit**

- 3.12.1
- Initial and Review Child Protection Conferences have continued to be held within statutory timescales as have LAC/CiC reviews. The Local Authority did not take up the offer to relax timescales around the 6 month review for Children in Care as it was not felt to be in the best interests of our children.
 - All meetings have been virtual and there have been some positives as a result of this including greater participation by Fathers in Child Protection Conferences. Children have also been more likely to participate in their meetings, both CP Conferences and LAC reviews. We will use the lessons learned during covid 19 restrictions to create more flexible ways that key individuals within the family can contribute to children's meetings.
 - There has been an increase in child protection numbers. Some of this increase is due to child protection plans not progressing due to interventions to reduce risk not being as available and assessment not then not being able to evidence sustained, positive change. Ending plans too early will put children at greater risk of harm and will be evidenced by an increase in repeat child protection plans and children coming into care following a crisis incident in the home.
 - An agenda item for the July Safeguarding Practice Group is to discuss how we can progress planning for children and confidently end plans where risk has reduced.
 - IRMs have been scrutinising risk reduction planning for all children who have been reported missing and are subject of a Child Protection Plan or are Looked After to ensure that plans are robust and that the Pan Cheshire protocol is being followed.
 - An additional IRM post has been agreed to help manage the significant increase/volume of activity in the Safeguarding Unit and ensure that we can continue to meet statutory timescales.

This post was filled on 06/07/20 and will help reduce pressure on the team so that we can begin to progress our service development plans.

- Our service development priorities are to improve the quality of child protection plans and to increase the effectiveness of the IRMs in effectively challenging delay in both child protection planning and for Children in Care. We have developed an escalation process to support with this and this will be rolled out on 07/07/20.

4.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 None identified.

5.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 None identified.

6.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

6.1 **Children & Young People in Halton**

Continuing to provide support and services for children and families during the lockdown is fundamental to the Council's commitment to support the most vulnerable families in the Borough.

6.2 **Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton**

None identified.

6.3 **A Healthy Halton**

Children and young people whose health needs and level of development is potentially compromised are supported during COVID 19 and statutory duties are met.

6.4 **A Safer Halton**

Children who are at risk of harm are identified quickly and services work together to minimise the risk of harm and take action to formally protect children in a timely way.

6.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**

None identified.

7.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

7.1 All services have in place to mitigate the impact of COVID 19.

8.0 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

8.1 Issues arising from a child's equality and diversity needs will inform the decision-making at the point of contact and it will be ensured that the voice of the child is to the forefront.

9.0 **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

9.1 There are no relevant background documents to this report.