

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Public Protection Committee
DATE	7 th October 2020
EXEMPT	No
CONFIDENTIAL	No
REPORT TITLE	Protection of Vulnerable Children and Their Families during Covid-19 Restrictions
REPORT NUMBER	OPE/20/147
DIRECTOR	Rob Polkinghorne
CHIEF OFFICER	Graeme Simpson
REPORT AUTHOR	Alison McAlpine
TERMS OF REFERENCE	1.1.1 1.2

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This Report serves to provide assurance to Committee on the measures implemented by Children's Social Work to ensure the safety and protection of vulnerable children and their families in Aberdeen City during the Covid-19 pandemic.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Committee:-

- 2.1 Note the impact of Covid-19 on Children's Social Work and how the service has responded to safeguard and protect children and young people during the pandemic.
- and
- 2.2 to note the learning to date, identified by Children's Social Work, which will inform our future service redesign.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 The COVID-19 pandemic led to unprecedented change across the world. The rapid progression towards lockdown measures in March 2020 necessitated an almost immediate change in the operating environment for Children and Family Services. New stresses arising from early learning and childcare, school and business closures, family confinement and isolation alongside physical and psychological health impacts, had the potential to be a trigger for abuse and neglect. We recognise that high stress home environments will increase the likelihood of domestic abuse. There is also awareness that individuals/groups might use the pandemic as an opportunity for criminal/sexual exploitation of children. This occurring at a time when children were less visible to

professionals who are normally engaged with them and when services and practitioners working with children are under acute pressure.

3.2 Referrals into the Children's Social Work Service

3.2.1 Rates of Referral

As anticipated, lockdown saw an immediate curtailing of referrals into the service from all sources. It is recognised that harm has not ceased over this period but children and young people were not as visible to usual eyes and ears. Referrals from partner agencies dropped to an unprecedented low - 407 in April 2020, where the monthly norm would be in excess of 700 referrals. 1942 referrals were received in the 12-week period 20 March – 12 June 2019, compared to 1236 in the same period in 2020; a drop of 706. Referral rates have picked up as services resume with referrals at 637 in July 2020.

3.2.2 Source of Referral

Police Scotland have consistently been the highest referral source to children's social work. This has remained the case since March 2020, followed by referrals from education, social work staff, health, then the Scottish Children's Reporter Association. This referral pattern has remained consistent throughout the pandemic, with these frequent referrer sources seeing approximately a reduction in rate of 33% over this period. As anticipated, referrals from Education have increased since the schools reopening in August, with them referring 11% of all referrals in week commencing 3rd September 2020.

3.2.3 Referral Type

The reduction in referrals was evident across all categories of referral, except physical abuse which has remained at a consistent level. In recognition of the particular risk posed by lockdown in respect of domestic, close attention has been paid to this area during the pandemic. Police Scotland and Children's Social Work have collaborated together noting that whilst Police Scotland have experienced a slight increase in reports of domestic abuse, referrals on this topic from all agencies into Children's Social Work did not show increase on previous years data. The numbers of children whose names feature on the Child Protection Register (CPR) noting this concern, do not currently demonstrate any appreciable drop or rise. We will continue to monitor this data as lockdown eases and services resume. The total number of children on the CPR currently where domestic abuse is an identified risk factor is 44 (31% of total). In August 2019 it was also 44 (35% of the then total).

3.2.4 Mental wellbeing has been recognised as an area of vulnerability across the city pre COVID. The restrictions of lockdown will for some children and young people have exacerbated their vulnerability. This aligns with feedback from colleagues across the country and learning from Wuhan and Italy. It is therefore a key consideration as we progress through the roadmap to recovery and beyond.

3.3 Review and Adaptions to Systems

3.3.1 The change of working environment has necessitated a rapid and fluid review of systems across children's services to ensure that professionals were still able to fulfil their statutory function to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need of care and/or protection.

3.3.2 Integral to this was ensuring that new referrals relating to children in need of care and/or protection as well as those children already assessed as requiring such, could continue to be supported in a timely and proportionate manner. Delivery of services needed to take account of the restrictions, children being less visible, and the usual formal and informal supports were in the main not available to them. Intervention for such children has continued at an intensive level to mitigate risk of harm and to promote change.

3.3.3 Children's Social Work quickly moved to introduce a Red, Amber, Green (RAG) coding system for the 1600 children open to the service. This ensured the appropriate frequency and modes of support and intervention. In addition to the RAG categories, Purple and Blue are used to reflect those children whose names feature on the CPR (purple) and those whose names have recently been removed from the CPR (blue). This system has become embedded in day to day practice and will aid shaping of provision of services throughout the pandemic and beyond, ensuring the allocation of our finite resources can best meet need. Professional judgement regarding case coding has remained fluid and considered by social work managers on a weekly basis, to reflect changing levels of risk and vulnerability. In August 2020, the distribution was:

- 10% red, 33% amber, 45% green, 9% purple and 3% blue.

3.3.4 The RAG system ensures that face to face contact from a professional from the team around the child takes place at least weekly, for whom there is the highest level of professional concern. This has relied on even closer multi-agency communication to minimise duplication of resource and to mitigate the potential spread of the virus. Where intervention and support could be safely offered via digital or other means, this was also put in place, thus ensuring that we were not further disadvantaging one of our most stigmatised and vulnerable groups, through unnecessary direct contact with adults out with their care setting.

3.3.5 The categories risk/need identified as requiring the highest level of support were children and young people:

- On the CPR; or on the edge of the CPR or recently removed from the CPR.
- In crisis/on the edge of care
- Whose care arrangements are at risk of breakdown
- Who are living with a parent with drug/alcohol/mental health vulnerabilities.
- Looked after at home or with kin
- Recently discharged from a placement; and
- At risk of Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE)/trafficking

3.4 Review and Adaptions to Staffing

- 3.4.1** Whilst staff continued to work out of offices where required, COVID restrictions required greater flexibility in terms of blended home/office/community working patterns. Staff have had to adapt to multiple changes to legislation and standard operating practices have had to change over this period.
- 3.4.2** A system was developed to ensure that staff who were not required to shield or self-isolate, were available to undertake critical service delivery and intervention with children and their families on a daily basis throughout the period of lockdown. In recognition that some interventions work eg group work could occur the allowed a realignment of some members of staff to other areas of critical need. This included staff from Children's Social Work joining the Out of Hours Team to bolster provision to children and families out with usual office hours.
- 3.4.3** Using blending modes of working including working from home, a rotation has ensured that services could still function fully in the event that staff who were coming into office space or required to undertake direct intervention with children and their families, became unwell or were required to self-isolate for a period.

3.5 Partnership Collaboration

- 3.5.1** Aberdeen Together
Aberdeen Together was a combined Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeen City Health and Social Care Partnership response to the COVID pandemic to ensure there was a clear focus to and supporting vulnerable groups across the city. In doing so it was important that there was a clear collation of data which identified existing or emergent vulnerable individuals/groups.
- 3.5.2.** Children's Social Work actively contributed to this integrated data framework which has provided a broader and richer understanding of vulnerability across the City. It has also further highlighted that the vulnerability experienced by families often cuts across multiple clusters and other agencies. This work has also enabled the Service to quickly respond to the Scottish Governments request for weekly data around vulnerable children and adults. Additionally, this multi-agency approach enabled the rapid understanding of emerging (or diminishing) need and informed the appropriate allocation of resources.
- 3.5.3** Children's Social Work instigated weekly partnership meetings with Third sector providers who deliver commissioned services in Aberdeen. This forum was well received and has continued throughout the past 6 months ensuring planning is aligned and recognises the need for a complementary and collegiate response to supporting vulnerable children and families.
- 3.5.4** This engagement with Third Sector partners also recognised that at the start of lockdown, some were directing their staff to have no face to face contact with children and families. The withdrawal of this critical support was keenly felt by some families and in cases of heightened risk and vulnerability, required Children's Social Work staff to plug the gap to keep children and families safe.

The regular engagement supported partners to gain confidence from the leadership shown by Children's Social Work staff and resume the delivery of critical support to families after the first few weeks.

3.6 Child Protection

- 3.6.1** Although there has been a reduction in numbers of children being placed on the CPR since March, reflecting the overall reduction of referrals of a child protection nature. Numbers on our CPR have remained constant at around 132 and at approximately 3.6 per 1,000 children. Initial Child Protection Case Conferences have never ceased during COVID. These have been held digitally with all agencies contributing. Conversion rates from Case Conference to Registration have remained high at 85-100% indicating that professionals are clear about what cases require to be considered at conference.
- 3.6.2** Numbers of children removed from the CPR in 2020 have generally remained consistent with the comparable periods in 2019. Reviewing of cases, where required, has continued digitally. Some children have been retained on the CPR for additional protection during COVID reflecting a higher-than-usual total on the CPR (142 in July 2020 cf 124 in July 2019) and 22 children having been on the CPR for more than 1 year.
- 3.6.3** Scottish Government COVID returns have illustrated that within Aberdeen City, 90-95% of children whose names feature on the CPR, have consistently received a weekly face to face direct visit during Covid-19. This statistic is one of the highest reported across all local authorities in Scotland.

3.7 Looked After Children

- 3.7.1** There has been a drop in number of children becoming looked after in the first 7 months of the year. The overall position is 572 looked after children, with an increase in children looked after at home (21% in June 2020 cf 15% in 2019) and a corresponding reduction in % of foster placements (47% in June 2020 and 52% in 2019). Kinship arrangements have remained consistent at 18%.
- 3.7.2** Our children accommodated in city residential homes have continued to be cared for by residential practitioners, who provide therapeutic care which recognises and supports their recovery from early life trauma and neglect. This model has successfully created flexible and loving care arrangements, ensuring that where children or staff have been deemed to be at increased risk due to health or wellbeing vulnerabilities, bespoke arrangements have been made to use alternative resources and create staff rotas which match the young person's needs, reduce risk factors and promote a sense of safety.
- 3.7.3** Adoption and Fostering training and assessment work has utilised digital technologies during the lockdown period. Foster cares have, on the whole, reported that they have continued to feel supported by the service. Pre lockdown the service has utilised a range of digital platforms to communicate

the need for local foster carers for local children. This has continued during the pandemic and there has been a slight but noted increase in the number of people expressing an interest in becoming foster carers. Progressing these fostering assessments despite lockdown restrictions has continued.

3.7.4 Staff within our residential and fostering provisions have worked hard to support our young people and carers, even when direct visits could not be facilitated. Committee members will recall Aberdeen City Council won the award as the local authority who embraced the digital platform Mind of My Own app, quicker than any other. Having worked hard to support staff and young people utilise this app pre-lockdown the value of this has been highly effective and enabled active engagement with young people throughout lockdown. As of August 2020 ACC has supported:

- 174 CEYP to have their own Mind of My Own Accounts, up 45% from 2019
- Worker accounts have grown from 352 to 377 in the same period, and
- 608 total statements from young people have been sent from the app.

3.7.5 This can be considered alongside Whatsapp, facetime and other digital means to ensure that close communication has suited the times that children themselves have sought contact. This digital support has no doubt assisted to ensure that over the past 6 months there has been very few placement disruptions.

3.7.6 There are 153 young people eligible for After Care. These young people and their families have continued to be supported on an outreach basis by our Youth Team. There is no doubt that a number of our care experienced young people who live independently have struggled with lockdown and the associated restrictions. Staff have worked hard to combat the impact of loneliness and isolation and heightened levels of anxiety with limited or no family members to call upon for support. Doorstop visits, provision of emergency provisions (food and wider financial vulnerability) have augmented the provision of direct face to face support when this has been required to meet need.

3.8 Vulnerable Learners - (Children in Need of Care/Protection/ Looked After Children)

3.8.1 Following the decision to close schools, Children and Family Services identified that a number of children and young people would require a level of targeted support beyond that possible through schools' digital and enhanced contact in addition to the planned contact with Children's Social Work professionals. In line with Scottish Government guidance, resources were mobilised to set up wellbeing hubs for children with heightened levels of vulnerability and those in need of care and protection. These hubs sat separately from the emergency childcare hubs set up for the children of keyworkers', in recognition that the needs of both groups were quite different.

- 3.8.2** Three dedicated wellbeing hubs, in addition to those for children with complex disabilities, were set up across the city, led by a Children's Social Work Manager, with a Head Teacher/Depute Head Teacher leading the day to day activities. From April until the end of term in July 2020 these hubs supported close to 150 children and young people. Close linkages with other partners offered additional input, ensuring an integrated and flexible provision. Throughout, provision was made for pre-school children in an early childcare provision to ensure our youngest children were supported by staff with sufficient knowledge of early child development. Over the summer many education staff were replaced by colleagues from community and family learning.
- 3.8.3** Referrals of children identified as potentially benefitting from a Hub place highlighted a combination of vulnerability factors. The highest proportion related to social factors associated with neglect and emotional wellbeing as well as family and environmental factors including domestic abuse and violence within the home. Poor mental health of parents and of children was another common factor, with many children identified as having additional support needs. These factors broadly align with categories indicated within child protection registrations and ensured an early and preventative response.
- 3.8.4** The link between poverty and child neglect/family breakdown is well recognised and this was further illustrated by the fact that the majority of referrals for Hub support were in respect of children in receipt of free school meal entitlement. The support hubs offered reflected this need with food supplies or washing children's clothing a critical practical element of provision. The success of the Hubs has strongly indicated merit in these continuing as part of our service offer to support families and enable children to remain within their families where it is safe to do so.

3.9 Children affected by Disabilities

- 3.9.1** Parents and carers of children with complex health and disabilities have understandably faced significant pressure on a day to day basis throughout the pandemic. The loss of natural forms of respite such as attendance at school and informal supports from extended families, often grandparents, who have been required to shield or self-isolate. This has meant that for some children, alternative care at home-based support has had to be put in place to mitigate the risk of family breakdown or ill health of child or parent/carer.
- 3.9.2** Provision was made to offer daytime support for children with complex disabilities within Orchard Brae Primary School/the base at Mile End Primary School and within Bucksburn Academy support wing.
- 3.9.3** For many, the reopening of schools in August alleviated this need, but for a small number of families whose children have not been able to return to school with their peers as yet. Consequently, enhanced packages of support have had

to remain in place, whilst we await further guidance from NHS Grampian and Scottish Government.

3.9.4 In line with guidance from Scottish Government on Self Directed Support, Children's Social Work has provided additional support to families where personal assistants have been required to shield therefore unable to deliver their care at home duties, as well as covering the costs of provision of alternative care.

3.10 Governance and Accountability

3.10.1 The Executive Group for Public Protection have statutory responsibility to oversee Child Protection Services across Aberdeen City. In recognition of the heightened risk to children and families there has been an increased frequency of meetings of the Executive Group. In addition to seeking assurance on the revisions to the National Child Protection Guidance the Executive Group also considered the data returns to Scottish Government ensuring resources where necessary were aligned to safeguard the most vulnerable members of our City.

3.10.2 The Child Protection Committee also increased the frequency of their meetings ensuring a coordinated and integrated response to safeguard the protection and support to children and young people at risk of harm. The Committee has a critical responsibility to communicate with the public and working in collaboration with the Councils Communications Team regular messages were disseminated via a range of digital platforms to highlight the potential risks children would be experiencing during lockdown.

3.10.3 Data and feedback from children, young people and their families would indicate they have felt supported throughout the COVID period. It must however be recognised that it is likely that Children's Social Work will need to continue to respond to the impact of COVID and lockdown for many months to come.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

4.1 There are no financial implications as a direct result of this report nor of the recommendations being proposed.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 There are no legal implications directly related to this report. Children's Social Work has fully adapted to revisions in the legal and policy framework issued by the Scottish Government during the COVID pandemic.

6. MANAGEMENT OF RISK

Category	Risk	Low (L) Medium (M) High (H)	Mitigation
Strategic Risk	That impact of Covid-19 and lockdown will	M	Systems have been adapted to take into account the

	present increased challenges with regard to 'hidden harm,' and a reduction in capacity to respond to referrals of a childcare and protection nature in a timeous manner		Covid-19 restrictions. The workforce has accelerated its use of digital platforms to keep in touch with children, their families and other agencies. Where direct contact is required, this has taken place and will continue to do so.
Compliance	N/A	L	N/A
Operational	Adjustment of systems to work in line with Government guidelines at a National and local level and for awareness of this across the city, for all key staff members	L	Well-developed multi agency plans are in place, supported by the Child Protection Committee and the ACEGPP. Staff across the partnership have been briefed on any changes to procedures for responding to need.
Financial	NA	L	NA
Reputational	Effective intervention to support children who experience or are at risk of significant harm is a core priority for children's social work. Perceived or actual failure to undertake this role would bring significant negative media interest and scrutiny of services delivered to children and young people.	L	Feedback received during the Covid-19 lockdown period has intimated that families who have received a service from Children's Social Work have largely been positive about the impact this has had on both them and their children.
Environment /Climate	Flexible working arrangement including home working and use of digital communication channels will have reduced the use of fuel based transport. Digital support will only over compliment face to face support but the learning and	L/M?	Risk Assessments are in place and are fluid in recognition of changing community transmission rates of Covi-19. Working from home now augments office and community based working, in line with guidance, and to ensure risk of spread is reduced. Equipment and support has been made available for staff.

	confidence staff have taken from their expanded use and familiarity will have a positive impact on the environment.		Strict adherence to guidance relating to PPE and safe working practices has been an ongoing aspect of workforce development and training throughout the pandemic.
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7. OUTCOMES

<u>COUNCIL DELIVERY PLAN</u>	
Impact of Report	
Aberdeen City Council Policy Statement	Proposals within this report support the delivery of Policy Statement 7 – Commit to closing the attainment gap in education while working with partners in the city.
Aberdeen City Local Outcome Improvement Plan	
Prosperous Economy Stretch Outcomes	<p>LOIP Stetch Outcome 2.1 Promoting inclusive economic growth for our most disadvantaged communities</p> <p>The Hubs early intervention approach to mitigate against educational and wellbeing inequalities of the City’s most vulnerable children and families help support the Scottish Government’s No-One Left Behind policy.</p> <p>In recognition of the links between child poverty and neglect/family breakdown the provision of practical support has been a critical element of intervention during the lockdown period and therefore food parcel support was provided to all children attending our wellbeing hubs, who required this.</p>
Prosperous People Stretch Outcomes	This Report acknowledges the significant contribution that children’s social work staff make, working in collaboration with partners, to contributing to all Stetch Outcomes in the Children’s section of the LOIP.
Prosperous Place Stretch Outcomes	<p>The proposals within this report support the delivery of LOIP Stretch Outcome 13 – No one in Aberdeen will go without food due to poverty by 2026.</p> <p>Recognition has been given to the benefits to maximising scope for children to remain within their own communities and intervention undertaken</p>

	throughout this pandemic has continued to embrace this.
Regional and City Strategies	N/A
UK and Scottish Legislative and Policy Programmes	The duties within this legislation place responsibilities on ACC to offer support to children in need, or those who may be in need of compulsory measures of supervision, may be at risk of significant harm or who may otherwise require multi agency support and intervention to reach their potential.
Children (Scotland) Act 1995, S22, S25, S23, S86.	
Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 S56	The duties in Part 9 of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 legally embed the concept of corporate parenting and collectively are <i>'designed to ensure that the attention and resources of various publicly funded organisations are explicitly focused on the task of safeguarding and promoting the wellbeing of looked after children and care leavers'</i> . (CELCIS, Corporate Parenting Implementation Notes, 2016).

8. IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

Assessment	Outcome
Impact Assessment	Not required
Data Protection Impact Assessment	Not required

9. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

10. APPENDICES

None

11. REPORT AUTHOR CONTACT DETAILS

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