

Report subject	Update on BCP Children's Services response to the COVID-19
Meeting date	30 June 2020
Status	Public Report
Executive summary	This report provides an update summarising Children's Services response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and to provide assurance as to how we will continue to work with partners to meet the needs of children, young people and their families during the course of the pandemic.
Recommendations	It is RECOMMENDED that Children's Services response to the COVID19 pandemic be noted.
Reason for recommendations	To ensure that all members of this committee are fully informed of the way that Children's Services have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Portfolio Holder(s):	Cllr Sandra Moore (Portfolio Holder for Children and Families)
Corporate Director	Judith Ramsden – Corporate Director – Children’s Services
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Wards	Council wide
Classification	For Information

Background

1. For Children’s Services Covid-19 has had a significant impact on the way that we work, with our families. We were able to respond to the changing landscape effectively in part due to the agile approach to working which was in place to support remote and home based. Those early adjustments coupled with strong partnership commitment to working with our families has enabled us to remain focused on our most vulnerable children.
2. Children’s Services staff have equally adapted swiftly and effectively to changes required in the way we work specially visiting and supporting interventions. They have identified and risk-rated vulnerable families already known to services and established clear guidance for visiting and coordinating work and support, both face-to-face and virtually, dependant on need and risk.
3. We have maintained services in line with statutory safeguarding requirements and a range of proactive measures have enabled us to maintain high performance on the core elements of safeguarding, this includes assessments of family’s needs, responding to children who going missing, social work visits and foster carer support.
4. In line with other Local Authorities – LA – we were offered, and have taken advantage of, our regulatory body Ofsted suspending their inspection programme by welcoming five redeployees into the service. They are working with front line staff undertaking a range of tasks all of which are supporting vulnerable children. Additionally, we have been successful in securing four social workers from the national support system, a call on all qualified social workers who were not working to register for the scheme.
5. During this period, we have continued to drive improvement with the implementation of the Complex Safeguarding Team which went live in May 2020. We concluded the new pathways for Early Help and interface with Children’s Social care front door. In effect one access point. All of which are designed to support vulnerable families, accessing the right services at the right time in an effective way.
6. The partnership working has been agile. Most noticeable is the continued delivery of safeguarding services. Business continuity plans were shared with all at early stages and adapted as the pandemic developed and we were required to work differently.
7. The Director of Children’s Services is required to provide weekly updates to Ofsted and the Department of Education (DfE) on matters pertaining to safeguarding, school attendance, Early Years provision, Education Health and Care plans, SEND provision and other matters the LA wish to raise. A fortnightly DfE data return is also submitted. This is a useful measure of our performance within the southwest.
8. The Coronavirus Act 2020 is a temporary law that came into force on Wednesday 25 March 2020 and impacts on social work practice. Subsequent amendments have been made to provide for extra flexibility in some circumstances that apply to Children’s Services, but will only be used when absolutely necessary, with senior management oversight, and will be consistent with the overarching safeguarding and welfare duties that remain in place, and be in the public domain.

9. The amendments will remain in place only for so long as needed. To date we have enacted two areas of flexibility on regulatory requirements; in relation to fostering and SEND respectively.

Education Health and Care Plans (EHC Plan)

10. BCP Council is committed to ensuring the continuation of children's Special Educational Needs and Disability – SEND - services during the Coronavirus Pandemic. There have been many challenges to this, including the continued closure or partial closure of schools and colleges, reduced number attending specialist settings and the need for health and social care colleagues to focus their efforts on the delivery of frontline services. Fluctuating numbers of staff across key SEND teams, who are themselves impacted by coronavirus, are shielding or in self-isolation, has impacted our capacity to deliver essential services. The impact of Covid - 19 is being felt across the service and so consideration has been given to using the relaxations offered through the temporary legislation, and SEND practices are adopting best endeavours according to the Government guidance.
11. Every effort is being made to minimise disruptions or delays to key services. The SEN team are now all working remotely and have been equipped to deal with emails and receive and make telephone calls. The SEN Team Manager continues to work closely with the team and senior leadership to ensure systems are working as closely as possible to normal processes and timescales.

Requests for Statutory Assessments

12. Requests for statutory assessment by early years settings, schools, colleges or parents are continuing as normal. We anticipate there may be some delays in gathering evidence from professionals across Education, Health and Social Care during the current crisis, and this will impact on timescales. We will use our best endeavours to keep everyone informed about likely timescales and to seek alternative ways to gather evidence, where this is likely to be challenging.
13. We will strive always to keep parents informed of any potential delays in this process. Where professionals are already involved with a child or young person, we may use existing evidence to support a full assessment of need.
14. Where these are new requests for professional advice, this may take longer than usual. Again, we will make every effort to keep parents informed of delays and of anticipated timescales for requests for professional advice.

Education Health and Care Needs Assessments (EHCNA)

15. Requesting professional advice for a statutory assessment is likely to be subject to delays. We regret this disruption to usual services. For a range of reasons, it is more challenging to continue with statutory assessment.
16. Our Educational Psychology Service, Occupational Therapy, Speech and Language and Early Help Teams are in touch with parents regularly to give updates on revised timescales, where needed, and to make alternative arrangements to carry out assessments.
17. SEN Panels are running as previously via Skype and continue to respond to the same range of needs as before. There are some delays in communicating outcomes of panel decisions to parents and carers as a response to reduced and fluctuating numbers in the SEN team. We regret these delays but are firmly committed to making our best endeavours at all times.

Issuing EHC Plans

18. Alongside challenges in gathering professional advice, the same challenges exist impacting our capacity to issue EHC plans to usual statutory timescales; relevant parties will be kept up to date and notified of any specific delays or challenges.

19. Consultations with education settings are also subject to similar challenges. If we are due to issue a final EHCP but have been unable to consult with education settings, we may, as a temporary measure, name the type of setting and add the setting name when that is known, to prevent further delays in the issue of the plan.

EHC Plan reviews

20. Annual Reviews and particularly those due to be held during this Summer Term, may be impacted by this current crisis. As much as possible Annual Reviews will continue to be held remotely, where this ensures the meeting is accessible to everyone. However, the gathering of information to submit to Annual Review may be subject to delay. This presents a further barrier to schools or specialist settings carrying out Annual Reviews in a timely manner.
21. Processes following an Annual Review continue as normal, with the education setting submitting a report within 2 weeks of the meeting. This timescale may be subject to change, where staffing issues, or the receipt of advice, or any other matter pertinent to the Annual Review, has been impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic.

Early Years DSG

22. The flexibility granted to redirect Early Years Block funding within the DSG to secure sufficiency of provision to meet the needs of key workers and vulnerable groups has not been used in BCP. This situation remains under review and the opportunity to access such flexibility is welcome and would be accessed should this be required as demand increases. As lockdown requirements are eased, and more people return to work, demand on the Early Years sector will come under increasing pressure and the need for such arrangements may change.

Adoption

23. The only changes to the Adoption services due to Covid- 19 have been that:
- (a) Assessments have been going to the Agency Decision Maker (ADM) for sign off directly.
 - (b) Health assessment is self-declaration (this is the same for all assessments and Coram BAAF have provided templates and guidance)
 - (c) They have not attended skills to foster - but as BCP employees we have identified all relevant training they have undertaken.
 - (d) Whilst any new Emergency Carer applicants could go through our normal panel process, we are keeping the option open of taking them straight to ADM to prevent any delays.
24. Assessments have been completed in 4-6 weeks.

Fostering

25. We are maintaining our current standards, we have agreed to continue with business as usual with our practice and processes in the Fostering Team i.e. on response to enquiries, assessments, reviews, panel approvals, including emergency carer assessments. We have used current DBS information for current emergency carer assessments as the applicants are BCP employees. Fostering Panel is carefully considering suitability of applications if there is any delay in receiving medical information.
26. Emergency carer assessments have been completed. For transparency and independent recommendation for ADM's decision making, all emergency carer assessments will be presented at the Fostering Panel.
27. Additional panels are being set up for approval of ongoing assessments; long term matching and emergency carer assessments

Children's Social Care – visits

28. The temporary regulations allow for us to have flexibility over the completion of reviews and visits within the time set out in regulations because of potential staff shortages, illness and reduced resources.
29. There remains an expectation that LAs conduct visits and regular reviews of children's care plans. This expectation is being met in BCP with visits planned to timescale and in line with social distancing guidelines, including virtually.

Resilience - sustaining services through minimising infection

30. Currently workforce capacity remains within our acceptable range to deliver a safe service with 68% of all staff in Children's Services working as normal. A daily tracker is in place that allows for oversight.
31. To maintain the continuity of service, Children's Services continue to take seriously the Government guidance about minimising infection through amendment of our working practices – including how offices are arranged to embrace the following:
 - (a) minimising contact with other staff and with children and families - by changing the way that we maintain contact with them, risk assessing this contact as to whether this is to be by face to face visits or other virtual means. Capacity for visiting children and families remains sufficient. However, as we enter the recovery phase the move towards partner agencies engagement with families is required. To support this approach, we will be reviewing all the plans for children and their families.
 - (b) changes of work practices- with staff mostly working from home (where appropriate)
 - (c) hand and respiratory hygiene
 - (d) increased cleaning of the environment
 - (e) limiting movement and considering the safest means of travel
 - (f) the use of personal protective equipment (PPE)
32. We are about to implement measures to mitigate the possible impact of test and trace that may result in an increased requirement for people to self-isolate if they have been in contact with people infected. To ensure the continuation of services such measures will include:
 - (a) **Organisational Resilience** – pairing teams to cover work or work collaboratively, in the case of a significant level of absence. The resulting resilience plan will identify alternative management structures and working arrangements. The plan will be updated regularly to reflect the changing demands of the Covid - 19 crisis, the work patterns of the teams and the needs led demands on the service.
 - (b) **Adaptation of Work in Self Isolation** – staff will be expected to complete all their regular duties other than where these would require contact with others, or to request leave. Managers will look to adapt working arrangements to facilitate remote working and reallocate work accordingly.
 - (c) **Virtual Meetings** - meetings will continue to be held virtually wherever possible to minimise contact and reduce the risk of any infection being spread between those in attendance.
 - (d) **Return to Office** - As the government imposed lockdown restrictions are eased, more team members may choose to return to the office to work for at least some part of the week. Managers will ensure that as well as observing social distancing, the number of staff in any one team in an office together is limited.
 - (e) **Review of Staff Currently Shielding** - arrangements will be kept under review. Workplans will include the planned return to work of team members who are no longer required to shield, whilst shielding staff will continue to work remotely in line with existing arrangements.

- (f) **Management Oversight and Tracking** - arrangements to track the number and impact of any staff that are required to quarantine will be put in place.

Our response in practice

33. As corporate parents we have ensured that all children with a social worker, including care experienced young people, will be getting laptops. This has been enabled through the Government scheme; these are being distributed and we are the first LA in the SW to be able to do this to date.
34. BCP Children's Centres launched their virtual offer for parents and carers with children under the age of five. Every weekday parents can discover a range of fun videos and activities to enjoy and help with children's learning and development. The virtual offer can be accessed via the Early Years Facebook Site or via the Family Information Directory.
35. We have worked with schools to provide both online resources that have been collated, curated and shared regardless of tenure of the schools. All subject areas have been richly resourced with the exception of Modern Foreign Languages in KS2, which we are working on for September return.
36. Schools and Children's Services have met throughout to identify and share good practice and to also to share the workload on safeguarding and FSM delivery with the Council.

Working with vulnerable children

37. We have made a significant difference to the lives of a number of vulnerable children whose families have been affected by the pandemic over the last few months. We have enabled almost half of our children who are subject to a child protection plan and 28% of our children who have an EHC plan to be in school.
38. 30% of children open to social care are in school and a total of 37% of vulnerable children are attending our early years settings too.
39. This is as a direct result of joint working across the LA, with schools, early years settings and partnership with parents, including the dedication of social workers, teachers and wider children's workforce to support vulnerable children into returning to school. Our Link Worker model provides a robust interface and efficient service to schools by providing Link Workers predominantly from Early Help services. The redeployment of HMI capacity is supporting this approach.

Working with others in partnership

40. To have the greatest impact and to effectively utilise resources we have joined forces with other agencies.
41. During the pandemic Children's Services have been working closely with others over a range of measures to support their work with children and families in BCP. Feedback from the police, health services and schools has been that they value our new ways of working and our approach to partnership.

Working with schools

42. We have:
- (a) worked with schools to support them to remain open during the course of the pandemic and to maximise educational opportunities for the children of key workers and the most vulnerable.
 - (b) worked with schools to maximise attendance of the vulnerable.
 - (c) worked with schools over their phased reopening for the return of additional pupils; in BCP 100% of primary and secondary phase is now open to wider groups as well as preserving the key worker and vulnerable group pupil offer.

- (d) supported schools with accessing PPE and paediatric first aid where they have been having problems with their supply chains.
 - (e) ensured that a robust Free School Meal offer was in place.
 - (f) developed risk assessments, HR tools and educational resources to support the wider opening of schools.
 - (g) completed deep dives on digital learning to assess engagement and identify and address digital poverty.
43. In addition, at the start of June, in primary phase alone over 2000 children from key worker and vulnerable groups were already in school in BCP before the return of wider groups.

Police and Courts

44. Another successful partnership working arrangement has been with the police and courts.
- (a) We worked with the police and the courts this week to safeguard 3 young people who were being exploited by criminal gangs. This was real partnership work and we are starting to see the impact of our decision to set up a specialist team to add capacity and spearhead some new ways of working.

Safeguarding

45. The Pan-Dorset Safeguarding Children Partnership has brought together partners in health and police to produce contact cards to remind our children and young people that services are still available to support them in this period (and beyond) and to encourage them to reach out for help if they need it or if they are feeling unsafe for any reason.
46. We have maintained momentum in our partnership working, to determine our recovery plan for coronavirus. This includes partnership participation in Children in Need Reviews, ongoing scrutiny from the Pan-Dorset Children's Safeguarding Partnership, and increased frequency of Community Safety Partnership meetings. The launch of the new complex safeguarding service went live with partnership support in May 2020.

Current trends and challenges

47. Contacts to the Front Door of Children's Services remain stable, but we are starting to see a marginal increase in contacts from schools. We are noticing a trend of domestic abuse within the household, linked to family tensions.
48. Other issues that are particularly prominent currently are neglect, self-harm, behavioural concerns, learning disability and emotional abuse. We have noticed a decline in parental alcohol misuse referrals, but an increase in those related to adult mental health and parental substance misuse.
49. A very small number of placements have broken down due to young people refusing to self-isolate. However, these are young people with complex needs whose placements may have broken down regardless of coronavirus. We have secured alternative provision for all of these young people.

What children and young people are telling us

50. BCP Council's Educational Psychology Service produced a survey for pupils in order to understand their sense of belonging and connection to their school during the coronavirus school closure and what schools could do to support them. The survey was completed by over 3,000 children and young people, spanning Reception to Year 13.
51. The themes emerging were that some students reported feeling a sense of loss of real contact, felt isolated and were unsure of friendships, whilst others have found a new sense of community online. Some children have found that they prefer home schooling, reporting improvements in their learning. Key things that are helping students to feel like they still

belong to a school community include contact from school (including contact from staff, virtual gatherings and continuation of reward and celebrations), connection with their teacher (especially through regular, predictable and two-way communication), connection with their class and with friends.

52. These findings have been shared with schools and we are working with them and partners to focus on approaches that promote social connection, well-being and mental health, support in transition and returning to school, as well as maximising learning benefits.

Our Plans for Recovery

53. The challenges involved in successfully reopening all of our schools to all age groups cannot be underestimated. The high level of uncertainty about health and safety amongst many parents and school staff remains, despite the best efforts of schools.
54. Practical challenges such as achieving class groups of 15 pupils, maintaining appropriate staffing levels and having the physical capacity in school buildings to double the number of classes remain. As the position around Covid- 19 infection rates is updated and schools, with our support, adapt to changes in the national guidance this will be an evolving picture.
55. In addition, current increased demands and resultant financial pressures on Children's Services and for SEN provision are national trends and may even increase post Covid- 19.
56. As we enter the recovery phase:
- (a) we are supporting schools and Early Years Settings to open safely for increased numbers of children.
 - (b) we are supporting trusts and governing bodies to implement guidance as it becomes available from government, sharing good practice and helping to address barriers.
 - (c) we have surveyed all schools to better understand the potential pressures that they face in relation to the availability of sufficient staffing resource and the capacity of buildings to accommodate the increased demands of social distancing.
 - (d) we are working with all schools to quantify expected demand for places, prioritising access for key worker and vulnerable group children, as the impact of lockdown changes and the restart progresses.
 - (e) we will continue to monitor and support schools closely to ensure we are able to respond to changing needs.
 - (f) We have established working groups to plan for learning recovery over the coming year including during vacation periods
 - (g) We will be working with the School Immunisation Team who are developing a recovery plan to be able to offer the HPV vaccine to the current school year 9 which should have been vaccinated this academic year, over the next academic year.
57. Over the next few weeks we will need to be focused and ambitious about what we need to achieve:
- (a) Social Workers are scheduling formal reviews for children so that the environmental factors of the pandemic are taken into account in up to date assessments of need and risk. Importantly, we have asked our partners to do this with us so that it is not a singular task.
 - (b) A qualitative audit of the work within the midwifery and health visitor service will need to be completed, led by the Head of QA in partnership with the health leads.
 - (c) We have asked schools to work with us on setting up a summer school offer to address the otherwise disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable children.
 - (d) Working with schools to ensure that a solution is available for the Summer calling on the latest Government funding to for LAs to assist those struggling to afford food and other essentials and that free school meals are in place

- (e) Working with schools, Public Health and school nursing to coordinate Covid - 19 testing in any local schools chosen to be part of national research surveillance project; two local schools are involved in a pilot project
 - (f) Supporting schools to develop a 'Recovery Curriculum' - The School Improvement Service will work alongside schools to prepare a "recovery curriculum" to ease the transition back to school and reduce the gap. This may include blended learning.
 - (g) We have started to consider the questions that we need to work through if we are to remain nimble and prepared for September in terms of the school offer and our resilience.
58. As our plans develop, we will be working with partners to achieve the following where necessary and appropriate:
- (a) Using public buildings, such as libraries and sports halls, civic centres and religious buildings to expand the space available to schools so that social distancing can be achieved, with greater numbers of pupils being educated in non-school settings, if not in schools.
 - (b) Encouraging qualified teachers, both recent and experienced to support recovery teaching and resource creation. They will be needed as class sizes will be smaller. This will help all children who have gone through a traumatic time during the crisis, and in particular disadvantaged children who will benefit greatly from lower pupil/teacher ratios.
 - (c) Ensuring that children and young people living in poverty and low - income homes are given the resources they need to learn at home, including access to books and creative resources, as well as technology.
 - (d) Working together so that we do not lose a generation because of the pandemic making even more children poor. We know childhood poverty and inequality limits life chances and is a significant factor in school achievement. Addressing this requires a 'can do' mentality – around unemployment, training and benefits as well as direct support to schools.
 - (e) Developing a plan for children's wellbeing to support children who suffered trauma in the pandemic. Well-being must be placed at the centre of how we adapt our services to meet the needs of children and young people.
 - (f) Working on existing educational priorities such as reading, but also new issues which are emerging, such as handwriting, as more pupils learn online

Summary of financial implications

- 59. Many of measures we have put in place have financial implications. We are looking to minimise these and ensure they are reflected in the Council's overall assessment of the impact of Covid – 19 on the delivery of the budget.
- 60. Whilst we are appreciative of the Government's contribution, we will be seeking further support.

Summary of legal implications

- 61. These are covered in the report above in respect of our response to Coronavirus Act and amendments, and in our ongoing adherence to our statutory duties.

Summary of human resources implications

- 62. We continue to work closely with our HR partners during the pandemic, supported by them to use our workforce flexibly and creatively to retain continuity of service.

Summary of environmental impact

63. We continue to work with our corporate colleagues to mitigate an impact on the environment during the course of the pandemic.

Summary of public health implications

64. We continue to work closely with our public health colleagues to maximise their offer to children and families during the course of the pandemic and to guide our work with partner organisations.

Summary of equality implications

65. See above for our impact on and continued focus to our work on the most vulnerable children.

Summary of risk assessment

66. Each aspect of the delivery plan will be risk assessed and outcomes taken into account.

Background papers

None

Appendices

There are no appendices to this report