



Children in Our Care Strategic Group (CIOCSG) Update

Report for Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) 9 October 2020

Update report from meeting of 27.11.20

1. COVID-19 impact on children - update.

To date there has been approximately 15 confirmed case of COVID-19 in relation to children in our care .These young people have been in a mix of internal and external placements including children's homes and foster care placement. Advice on each case has been sought from Public Health England and procedures followed.

There have been several confirmed case of COVID-19 in relation to foster carers and staff working with children in our care. Each situation has been considered on its own merits and appropriate responses made. We are grateful that, thus far, that there has not been any serious long term health consequences for the children or their carers.

Staffing in the children's homes continues to be a challenge and its of credit to the staff that they have managed to keep things going and have been willing to 'work differently' and cover where needed however its true to say that staff are now feeling exhausted and new ways of supporting staff is being considered.

As for all children, the pandemic continues to have an impact on the lives of some of the children in our care, some have had to self-isolate when a friend at school or in their 'bubble' tests positive. Arrangements are in place to try and minimize the impact of these disruptions with either work being completed at home or on line and follow up from the Virtual School staff where appropriate.

The Virtual School (VS) continues to work closely with teachers, foster carers and those children in care who have struggled with the return to school however for most children they seem to have settled back into school routines and have taken things in their stride.

The newly appointed educational phycologist is now offering additional support, particularly for those pupils who have transitioned from primary to secondary and post 16 education.

Virtual School are currently exploring the possibility of offering more IT support for those young people who may not have access to a laptop/ network connections due to leaving care or moving placement.

Some young people find it more challenging than others to manage the restrictions particularly in relation to socializing and these young people have tested the boundaries resulting in the need for multiagency responses. However for some children it also appears that they are thriving and settled and are perhaps benefitting from focused attention and a quieter pace with less demands on their time.

Family time (Contact) for children in care with their birth family continues to progress. We have seen a steady increase week on week of direct in person contacts as well as continued use of video calls to supplement.

We are foreseeing some pressure on the contact service as the demand increases particularly in relation to having enough safe venue space available especially due to the Winter weather resulting in contacts in the open space/community no longer being a viable option.

We continue to be impressed by the children themselves and their acceptance and knowledge of the restrictions and the need to manage contact safely, parents too have largely responded to the new restrictions in the contact arrangements without much conflict. It has to be acknowledged though that there is an emotional impact on both children and parents of having such restrictions.

Social workers continue to have contact with children in our care in line with and at times above specified visiting requirements. The majority of children have had in person contact with the social worker however we also continue to use video calls as a means to maintain ongoing contact.

The majority of the key meetings related to children in our care continue to take place by virtual means however for a small number of situations it has been necessary and more beneficial to hold the meetings in an office base.

Referral numbers to CAMHS in general continues to be high and a theme of raised anxieties in children is noted. We continue to have a dedicated CAMHS team for children in our care and they continue to offer sessions with children on a face to face basis. The team are planning on reinstating the training session for carers however this will be done online as opposed to face to face groups.

Health assessments for our children in care continue to be undertaken on a hybrid basis (in person and video calls dependent on the circumstances) and health professionals are finding that some are engaging better via video calls. We are expecting a decline in the number of children having had a dental check due to the pandemic however we can be assured that children are still receiving dental treatment in a timely way when it is required. A report with regards to the numbers of health assessments undertaken and compliance to timescales is being produced and will be shared with the Corporate Parent Board in due course.

The Police Force continues to protect and serve and whilst involved in responding where necessary to the needs of children in our care they are not reporting any increased demand on them to be involved with children in our care as a result of the effects of the pandemic.

The Leaving Care Service continues to meet with partner agencies to consider opportunities to engage young people who are leaving or who have left care, in opportunities for Education, Employment or Training (EET) however the pandemic has impacted on the opportunities available and this area will be a challenge moving forward.

Care leavers have received support from the Leaving Care Service in all other respects and all efforts are made to ensure that young people aren't left in isolation or in financial difficulties due to the pandemic.

2. Celebrational and Awards – Children in Our Care

The pandemic has meant that we have been unable to hold our usual annual celebration event with the children and young people however a plan is in place to ensure that children's success and achievements can still be recognized. Currently there is a small working group developing a plan to hold the event 'virtually'. In the meantime nomination forms have been sent to social workers, carers and schools and will be sent to partner agencies. We are particularly looking for connections with public figures or local celebrities to get involved in making the awards as we feel this will make the event that bit more special for the children.

3. Digital Safeguarding

It is recognised that children and young people are naturally spending more and more time 'on-line' and the pandemic has encouraged the use of the internet and on-lines services. With this in mind we are highlighting the need for parents and carers to be vigilant and aware of the dangers that being on-line can bring to children and young people and a digital safety campaign has been launched which aims to provide parents and carers with information about safe and responsible internet use.

4. Children's Commissioner briefing – The Children who no-one knows what to do with.

Reference was made to the new briefing note releases by the Children's Commissioner this month entitled 'the children no-one knows what to do with'

The briefing note highlights the national plight of some of the most vulnerable children in our care, where their needs are complex and cannot be met in a foster placement and local resources aren't sufficient to meet these needs. This results in some children being placed in external provision which may not offer a quality service. The account of some young people's experience is harrowing. The report is highlighting some of the failures in the system and refers to previous reports such as 'Pass the Parcel- children posted around the care system (2019)

The children in care strategic group also referred to the Contextual Safeguarding Network report – 'A Sigh of Relief' and noted how the issues raised within this report fed into the findings of the Children's Commissioners study.

As a result of this discussion the children in care strategic group were keen to strengthen the multiagency response for children in care in Stockton with an aim of reducing the need to place children in external provision outside of our local area.

The strategic group will continue to discuss this further and considers that this maybe something that the children in our care action plan needs to give priority to.

5. Children In Our Care (CIOC) action plan.

The children in our care action plan was reviewed at the Children in Our Care Strategic Group meeting and will be updated and shared at a future Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) meeting.

The plan includes what we do routinely to meet the priorities of the Corporate Parenting Strategy and how we are progressing. The plan does include the priorities set by the CPB namely - the emotional health and wellbeing of children in our care however the group feel that the action plan now contains a lot of information and it is difficult to establish what the main priorities are therefore are proposing that the plan needs refreshing to make it clearer. The group still feel that emotional health and wellbeing needs to be a priority but are proposing that multiagency responses to maintaining children in placements within the local area will need to be added as one of the main priorities.

Jackie Ward

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30.11.20