



# Children in Our Care Strategic Group (CIOCSG) Update

Report for Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) 12 February 2021

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# Section 1: Items Discussed

## **COVID-19 – update – agency operational plans**

Agency operational plans were discussed. This followed the third lockdown commencing 5 January 2021.

### **Children's Services**

Arrangements to visit CIOC continue as before lockdown. Contact is being made in line with procedures and follows a hybrid model i.e. mix of direct face to face contact and via a number of remote methods.

Family time continues to be offered to all children although the level of direct contact occurs on a less frequent basis. Indirect contact also continues to be offered to ensure CIOC are maintaining contact with those who are significant to them.

There have been a few CIOC and their carers who have tested positive for COVID19 but all have recovered quite quickly.

A number of COVID19 cases have been reported within our children's residential care homes but have been managed well and the infection contained.

We continue to experience real pressures in identifying appropriate residential placements for teenagers between 14-17 years and in particular, those who display high levels of risk-taking behaviours.

Internally we have set up a specific COVID19 programme for those vulnerable children and young people who may have experienced loss or bereavement as a result of the pandemic. This programme has predominantly been shared with our schools and is aimed at supporting those CIOC who might benefit from therapy, but who do not necessarily meet the criteria for CAMHS. To date the uptake has been quite low and additional COMMS is planned to be rolled out.

### **Virtual School (VS)**

Arrangements continue as before lockdown. Contact is being undertaken following a hybrid model with some children, where appropriate, being seen directly in schools and others via a variety of remote methods.

The Virtual School are using some of their budget to purchase additional laptops to ensure that CIOC do have the appropriate IT equipment to be home schooled.

### **Early Help**

Work continues on data cleansing to ensure that we have an accurate picture of those vulnerable children who may not be attending school. Work is also underway working alongside our attendance team and Virtual School, looking at those CIOC who are placed outside of Borough to ensure we have an accurate picture of which of these children are attending school and which are being home schooled. Although placed out of Borough these CIOC remain our responsibility and have also been offered laptops to support home learning.

## **Health**

CIOC (LAC) nurses continue to work virtually. All Initial and review health assessments are offered remotely. Feedback from a number of young people is that this is their preferred method to participate in a health assessment. Therefore moving forward a hybrid model of working will continue post pandemic.

## **CAMHS**

Arrangements continue as before lockdown. Appointments, therapy and assessments are being offered either face to face or remotely. The numbers of referrals to CAMHS have dropped since the new year. Priority of service continues to be given to CIOC. The service has recently developed a specific person of contact (SPOC) for all new referrals. Information sharing and communication with regards to any children and young people open to CAMHS will however continue in the usual way i.e. individual workers will be contacted directly.

## **Libraries**

A click and collect service is available so that books for all children and young people can be ordered on line. Electronic and audio books are also available and can be accessed free via our website. Books, magazines and newspapers can be found in various different languages. A number of craft activities, book reviews, author and artists sessions can also be accessed to aid learning and development of CIOC.

## **Police**

Front line officers continue to carry out their duties which does include face to face conversations with children and young people. This third lockdown has seen tighter COVID restrictions being enforced by the police.

## **Children in Our Care (CIOC) action plan – ‘our priorities’ revisited**

The CIOCSG are in the process of reviewing the CIOC action plan, to refocus on the priorities as identified in the Children in Our Care and Care Leavers Strategy (2018-2021).

We remain committed to supporting children to remain within their birth families wherever possible. Many children do come into care in times of crises and stay in care for short periods before going home. We will continue to look at ways in which we can support families in times of crises, offering interventions to safely maintain these children at home.

When children and young people do come into care we want to do as much as we can to ensure that we receive value for money in the delivery of care, by thinking about how we can work more efficiently and how we can ensure a reduced need for out of borough placements.

For the majority of children and young people who do come into care, the best option is to return home as soon as it is practical and safe to do so. This means that we need to consider how we can provide work with families, children and young people to ensure that reunification is pursued as a permanence option and that decisions made are done so in the child’s best interests.

## **So our priorities are:**

1. Reduce the numbers of CIOC (prevention, edge of care and reunification)
2. Ensure best value for money (improved sufficiency, managing demand, commissioning)
3. Ensure the right permanence options including focus on remaining or returning home (permanence planning)
4. Assess impact on CIOC from all decisions.

How will we know that we are making a positive difference?

### **1. Prevention and edge of care –**

- A reduction in the numbers of children coming into care where there are positive and appropriate alternatives that we can support them with
- Early identification and support for children on the edge of care
- Swift access to support in crises
- Easier access to more suitable and stable accommodation
- Improved resilience, relationships and wellbeing
- Support with reducing high risk behaviours and vulnerability.

### **2. Ensure the best value for money:**

- Improved placement choice and quality
- More placement opportunities in and around Stockton
- More settled placements and less unplanned moves
- Involvement and influence in placement planning
- Continued high quality access to secure and stable accommodation for care leavers.

### **3. Ensure the right permanence options including focus on home**

- A clear permanence plan that is developed and agreed with young people
- A consistent key worker who supports the child's plan for permanence
- Placement opportunities that clearly reflect the plan for permanence.
- Support a successful plan to return home where is it safe to do so.

### **4. Access impact on CIOC from all decisions**

- Improved education and learning outcomes
- Positive and engaging employment and training opportunities
- Swift access to mental health support services and therapies
- Easy access to health services and positive physical activities
- Good specialist multi agency support for vulnerable adolescents
- Increased opportunities for children and young people to influence and shape services
- A strong platform for children and young people's voices to be heard and responded to
- Children and young people to have a clear say in decisions effecting their care
- Evidence that children and young people's voices are leading to real positive change.



## **Prevention and edge of care**

We continue to invest in our edge of care service, increasing resources in order to prevent children and young people coming into care. A new family support team is due to become effective in March 2021. One aim of the team is to identify those children who are at risk of coming into care at an earlier stage and to provide intensive support to these children and young people and their families.

It is planned that this team will work closely with 'Our Place', a home which offers short episodes of respite care whilst supporting families who may be going through crisis. Therapy, activities and parenting programmes are some of the services offered via 'Our Place' to prevent children from coming into care. To date, feedback from those parents accessing this support has been extremely positive.

The coming home/going home programme of work continues. 22 children have been identified where it is appropriate that they either remain a CIOC but return to Stockton or, who can safely and appropriately return to their birth family. It is proposed that the new family support team will offer additional support to these children and their families in order to achieve their plans. To date 5 children have either returned to Stockton or have returned home to be reunited with their families. Savings from these highly expensive out of area placements will offset some of the overspend in our current budget.

A programme of work is nearing completion which has considered those CIOC who are settled in their long-term foster placements and where there is no reason for them to remain being looked after children. Alternative orders for these children are to be sought but with their carers remaining entitled to the same offer that is available, had they remained a foster carer. Many of these children will be placed with a family or friend carer. The support offered will include financial and emotional support and any relevant training. Our new family workers will be allocated a family to offer any additional support that may be required.

Our Turnaround home is a home that offers short term care where there is a permanence plan for these children to be returned to their birth families. This home has recently expanded its remit in response to need, and has very successfully supported one of our care leavers in parenting her new born baby. By offering this package of support this mother was able to remain with her child, whilst also receiving support for her own vulnerabilities. It is planned to further develop the skills of the staff associated with this home so that more young people can benefit from this type of intensive support package.

## **Sufficiency Strategy**

Our sufficiency strategy has recently been refreshed. The purpose of the strategy is primarily to set out a clear framework for how we will work with our partners across Stockton and the surrounding areas, to secure the best possible range of placement opportunities and support services for CIOC and Care Leavers. A clear plan and approach for CIOC will reduce the need for children to be in care, will reduce the length of time children remain in care and will reduce expenditure.

Sustainable improvements will be underpinned by improvements to our strategic commissioning arrangements that will make a positive difference to the quality and impact. Strengthening our relationships with the external market of potential provider organisations and working with public sector placements in cooperation with Tees valley authorities at an early stage in our sufficiency planning will be a key feature of our approach.

Moving forward we will draw on up to date data to inform our understanding of need and forecast demand. This better understanding will inform our strategic commissioning of placements, with particular focus on increasing both in house residential care and in house foster care and support services for children and young people, and will shape our delivery to ensure the best possible outcomes and life chances for our children and young people.

Although we continue to experience a very difficult period, partners remain very passionate about CIOC. Despite having to respond to and adapt to new ways of working, there does remain a real commitment to refocus our current CIOCSG action plan and drive forward the operational delivery of the priorities set out in the CIOC and Care Leavers Strategy 2018 - 2021.

**Rhona Bollands**

**Assistant Director Children's Social Care**

**01/02/2021**