

Committee: **Social Services Scrutiny Committee**

Date of meeting: **17th March 2021**

Report Subject: **Children's Services response to vulnerable children during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Portfolio Holder: **Cllr John Mason, Executive Member for Social Services**

Report Submitted by: **Tanya Evans Head of Children's Social Services**

Reporting Pathway								
Directorate Management Team	Corporate Leadership Team	Portfolio Holder / Chair	Audit Committee	Democratic Services Committee	Scrutiny Committee	Executive Committee	Council	Other (please state)
4.2.21	9.2.21	24.02.21			17.3.21			

1. **Purpose of the Report**

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is provided Members with information on how Children's Social Services supported vulnerable children since the COVID-19 pandemic started in March 2020.

2. **Scope and Background**

- 2.1 This report will provide information on how children's services changed the way in which services have been delivered throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, how we worked with partners and as a region to ensure a consistent approach was taken.

3. **Options for Recommendation**

- 3.1 The Report has been considered by the Corporate Leadership Team.

Option 1

Members are asked to scrutinise the report on the Children's Services response to the COVID-19 pandemic and contribute to the continuous assessment of the effectiveness of the directorate by making appropriate recommendations to the Executive Committee.

Option 2

Accept the report as provided.

4. **Evidence of how does this topic supports the achievement of the Corporate Plan / Statutory Responsibilities / Blaenau Gwent Well-being Plan**

Childrens Services response to COVID-19 links to the following key priorities in the Corporate Plan:

- To intervene early to prevent problems from becoming greater;
- To promote and facilitate new ways of delivering health and social care involving key partners and our communities;

- To put effective safeguarding arrangements in place to protect people from harm.

5. **Implications Against Each Option**

5.1 ***Impact on Budget (short and long term impact)***

Welsh Government established an Emergency Hardship Fund to support councils during the pandemic. Children's services were able to access this to fund fixed term support worker posts to support the work of the social work teams in the early days of the pandemic. The costs of these fixed term posts were fully met by the hardship fund.

5.2 ***Risk including Mitigating Actions***

5.3 ***Legal***

There are no legal implications within the report, but already there have been a number of reviews undertaken by different bodies and it is likely in the future there may be a public enquiry into the overall handling of the Coronavirus in Wales.

5.4 ***Personnel***

There are no personnel issues within the report other than to say it is important that we recognise the work of all the front line care staff including foster carers and their supervisors /managers who have, as always, pulled out all the stops to ensure services were maintained and the children and families of Blaenau Gwent continued to be supported.

6. **Supporting Evidence**

6.1 ***Performance Information and Data***

6.1.1 When the first National local down was announced on the 23rd of March 2020 the Gwent Heads of Children's Services met to discuss and agree a regional approach to service delivery during the COVID 19 period.

6.1.2 This approach was informed by guidance which had been issued up until that point by, CAFCASS Cymru, the Court Service, and the Heath Board. The approach has continued to be reviewed as new guidance has been issued in particular from Welsh Government who issued their first set of guidance on the 21st of April 2020.

6.1.3 The following information provides information on how services have been delivered in each of the service areas in Children's Services throughout the pandemic.

6.1.4 **Information Advice and Assistance** – This service has continued to provide a timely response to all referrals into Children's Services without disruption. There was a small decline in referrals during the first 2 weeks of the pandemic however referral rates have remained as we would expect them ever since.

- 6.1.5 **Families First** - As this service was not deemed critical due to being a preventative service, at the beginning of the pandemic some of the staff were redeployed to the social work and supporting change teams to ensure there was enough staffing capacity to continue service delivery to our most vulnerable children in the Authority. These staff have since returned to their substantive posts as the pandemic did not lead to high levels of staff being off at any one time due to COVID 19. Throughout the pandemic Families First has continued to deliver preventative services. In the early stages they RAG rated their caseloads to ensure those who were most in need continued to receive face to face visits. The team quickly adapted to using social media and other IT platforms to keep in contact with families and offer support.
- 6.1.6 **Flying Start** – In the early stages of the pandemic some Flying Start support workers were redeployed to adult services to support with home care duties due to high levels of need. Also Health Visitors connected to the programme were redeployed by the Health Board to front line hospital services. These staff have since returned. Flying Start staff have continued to engage with children and families using social media, in particular their face book page which provided daily advice and activities for parents at a very challenging time. They also provided activity packs to families in the initial lockdown. The staff do provide face to face visits when the need is established.
- 6.1.7 **Early Year's Child Care and Play Team** – this team has played a crucial role during the crisis. They have worked closely with colleagues in Education to ensure school/child care provision was available for keyworker staff and the most vulnerable children in the borough. The Early Years and Child Care Team has provided significant support to child care providers during COVID-19 which has played a large part in 64% of providers remaining open throughout the crisis.
- 6.1.8 **Social Work Teams** – These teams are responsible for providing services to all children in need of care and support, children on the child protection register, our children looked after, children with disabilities and our care leavers. At the start of the pandemic all Team Managers RAG rated their caseloads and only those identified as red received face to face visits. These visits were undertaken in line with the regional home visit guidance developed, which was based on advice from Public Health Wales and Welsh Government. When the initial lockdown ended face to face visits were offered to all open cases to the social work teams and this has remained the case to date to prevent needs from escalating. The teams have also used social media to support and keep in contact with children and families which has worked very well for some.
- 6.1.9 To be clear if a child was deemed at risk then this child would always be seen face to face to ensure they were safe. We have continued to see children who are on the child protection register face to face for their statutory visits and we have continued to work face to face with children and families where there is a high risk of them coming into care.

- 6.1.10 The various meetings required under the Wales Safeguarding Procedures have continued to take place but by virtual means. This has seen greater participation of partners as we share the same IT platforms, however some children and families initially struggled to engage which was not acceptable to the department as family engagement is crucial to this process. Steps have been taken to involve families via telephone conferencing and a plan is in place to start inviting families into the offices to participate in meetings when COVID restrictions allow.
- 6.1.11 **Children Looked After** – All children looked after have continued to be seen in line with statutory requirements. When these visits have been undertaken face to face the necessary risk assessments have been done and protective PPE measures undertaken. We have kept in contact with some of our children virtually using WhatsApp which has worked very well for all involved. All of our children looked after who live in Blaenau Gwent have been offered education placements throughout the pandemic. This has been a crucial resource and supported placement stability. We also ensure that each child had access to IT equipment to make sure they could access on line learning and our education coordinators have offered individual support to those children with additional needs.
- 6.1.12 **Family Time (contact)** – During the first few weeks of the initial lockdown all face to face contact between children looked after and their families was stopped. However, as new guidance was issued by Welsh Government we quickly moved to a position of starting this again as it is so important for the wellbeing of our children. All the necessary risk assessments are in place and protective measure being taken to minimise any COVID 19 risks.
- 6.1.13 **Foster Carers** – Throughout the pandemic the placement team has continued to support our Blaenau Gwent foster carers. Face to face visits have been undertaken when necessary to support vulnerable placements but a lot of support has occurred by keeping in touch via phone or WhatsApp. Regular letters have been sent to foster carers keeping them updated and a regular newsletter has also been sent out offering advice on how to manage various aspects of care during the pandemic. Foster carers have been consulted twice via questionnaires during the pandemic and the feedback is very positive about the level of support they have received from the department. Fostering assessments have continued to be undertaken and foster panels have continued to meet virtually
- 6.1.14 **Adoption** – Adoption assessments have continued throughout the pandemic all be it virtually with final home visits being made face to face. Adoption training has moved to virtual delivery and feedback from adopters has been very positive. Children have continued to be placed with adoptive parents following well-structured guidance developed by the National Adoption Service.
- 6.1.15 **Emergency Out of Hours Service (EDT)** – The service continues to operate as normal although staffing levels at the Gwent EDT service are

reviewed daily and staff from across the wider Gwent area have been identified to support as and when required.

- 6.1.16 **Working with Partners** – As previously mentioned the Gwent Heads of Children's Services have work very closely together to ensure the children's social services being delivered throughout the pandemic have been consistent across Gwent.
- 6.1.17 The Regional Safeguarding Board continued to meet virtually and increased its frequency to monthly to ensure safeguarding data was monitored and partner agencies could share intelligence on emerging safeguarding issues in the region. The board led on raising awareness of the need to report safeguarding concerns across the region and lobbied Welsh Government to take a national approach to this which was forthcoming.
- 6.1.18 Within Blaenau Gwent we have worked very closely with our Health Visiting colleagues. We have enabled health visitors to use the flying start hubs (prior to the 2nd lockdown) to undertake routine health check under the Health Child Wales Programme due to access to GP surgeries being restricted.
- 6.1.19 We have worked extremely closely with education colleagues to ensure all vulnerable children in Blaenau Gwent were identified and then offered school hub placements. We have increased the numbers of social workers in Families First who are aligned to the schools to support when needs have been identified and take steps to prevent them from escalating.
- 6.1.20 We have continued to work with the third sector to support vulnerable families in relation to a number of issues. In particular working with Phoenix Domestic Abuse Service when dealing with domestic violence, Llamau when dealing with mental health issues and GAVO who sit on our Children and Communities Grant (CCG) Steering group which is responsible for seeking to address the support needs of the most vulnerable children and adults in our communities through a range of early intervention, prevention and support mechanisms.

6.2 ***Expected outcome for the public***

The work Children's Social Services has been doing during the outbreak of COVID-19 has been to ensure we minimise the harm of COVID-19 and to keep people as safe as possible from contracting this virus whilst continuing to deliver services to those who have required our help and support.

6.3 **Involvement (consultation, engagement, participation)**

The service has had to work at speed to try and ensure our communities safety against contracting the virus and has often had to make decisions without the consultation or engagement of the public which has often been as a result of implementing Welsh Government and Public Health Wales guidance at pace. If at all possible we have tried to consult with children and families who are in receipt of services.

6.4 **Thinking for the Long term (forward planning)**

Children's services are still in part in the responsive phase, however there is a need for reflection on how we have responded to this pandemic in order to inform and shape the recovery phase in the future. Despite the changes we have needed to make to service delivery we have still been able to take forward planned service developments.

6.5 **Preventative focus**

Children's Services have tried to be proactive to prevent the spread of COVID-19, we have continued to make contact with vulnerable children and families throughout the pandemic as well as continued to visit where it has been necessary and safe to do so. This has been to try and prevent the spread of the virus but also ensure people are able to continue to manage during the lockdown period.

6.6 ***Collaboration / partnership working***

In many cases responding to the pandemic has strengthened joint working at local, regional and national levels, with more agile and responsive decision making and action planning being enabled. Relationships with providers have been strengthened by the continual dialogue, with local authorities, and others, supporting homes with the provision of advice and updates, and sharing learning.

6.7 ***Integration (across service areas)***

Health and Social Care have had to work closely together to reduce the potential harm of the Coronavirus outbreak for the public, this has included working in an integrated way to ensure we protect and safeguarding vulnerable individuals during these unprecedented times.

6.8 ***EqlA (screening and identifying if full impact assessment is needed)***

There is not a requirement for this report to undertake an Equality Impact Assessment.

7. **Monitoring Arrangements**

- 7.1 This report is a one off report to reflect on the work undertaken by Children's Social Services since March 2020 since the start of the Coronavirus outbreak within Blaenau Gwent. If and should there be a further outbreak of the virus then we would bring a further report back to identify how and what we were able to do to continue to support our most vulnerable children to continue to get the care and support they require.

Background Documents /Electronic Links

- N/A

