

**Children and Families Service Report for
Children and Young People Scrutiny Commission
20th May 2020**

CFS Response to Covid-19

Introduction

The Children and Families Service has continued to provide critical services to children and families during the Covid-19 situation.

Following the Government guidance and in line with Council policies, by 26th March 2020, the Children and Families Service had closed the Youth Hubs, the Contact Centre, 275 Mare Street (the Youth Justice Service building) and moved to the majority of services being provided virtually, through telephone or video technology or online.

Whilst the majority of our casework contact with children and young people in Children's Social Care has moved to being undertaken virtually, staff have continued to make face to face visits to the children and families that we are most concerned about. At a very early stage, all open cases were reviewed by practitioners and risk rated in the context of Covid-19. These risk assessments are regularly reviewed to inform decisions about the level and type of contact that we are having with each child and young person that we are working with.

Child In Need Reviews, Child Protection Conferences and Looked After Child Reviews are all taking place remotely. Internal panels and court work are also being maintained successfully through remote links.

Young Hackney's youth work provision within the community has moved to mainly online resources and contact. The early help support offered by Young Hackney and the Family Support Units is continuing with regular contact being maintained via telephone, text and video calls.

Youth Offending services continue to be provided in line with the requirements of court orders, although a significant amount of contact is taking place via phone or video link. Visits to young people in custody have been suspended by the Youth Custody Service but contact with these young people is continuing.

The Children and Families Clinical Service is continuing to provide therapeutic support to children and families using online platforms.

Key trends update

There has been a significant decrease in the number of referrals received since social distancing measures were introduced, including the closure of schools.

The service received 50 referrals in the week ending 24th April 2020, which is a 46% decrease compared to a weekly average of 92 referrals (based on April 2019 - February 2020 data).

13 Section 47 (Child Protection) enquiries were started in the week ending 24th April 2020, which is a 55% decrease compared to a weekly average of 29 Section 47 enquiries started (based on April 2019 - February 2020 data).

As at 24th April 2020, there were 260 children on a Child Protection Plan - this is a slight increase on the number before the Covid-19 situation (258 children on Child Protection Plans in the first week of March 2020).

As at 24th April 2020, there were 438 looked after children - this is a slight increase on the number of looked after children before the Covid-19 situation (431 looked after children in the first week of March 2020).

Senior managers are monitoring data on key performance indicators on a weekly basis.

Domestic Abuse related contacts and referrals received by the Children and Families Service

The overall number of contacts made to Children’s Social Care in relation to domestic abuse has increased compared to the same approximate period last year. The number of contacts received from the Police has also increased in comparison to the same approximate period in the previous year. However, the number of referrals (contacts that have been accepted for a service) from the Police is similar to the previous year, whilst there has been an increase in domestic abuse referrals overall of approximately 10%.

Referral Category - domestic abuse or domestic violence	Total received 1st-30th April 2019	Total received 23rd Mar-17th April 2020	<u>Received from Police only</u> -1st-30th April 2019	<u>Received from Police only</u> -23rd Mar-17th April 2020
Contacts	101	152	80	105
Referrals	53	59	45	44
% Contact to referral	52%	39%	56%	42%

Service updates and additional measures put in place

Contact with vulnerable children and young people

Social work units and their managers have reviewed all individual cases to inform a decision about the approach to visiting children and families. These case by case judgements are

being kept under regular review with social workers now being expected to update their original RAG ratings on a weekly basis.

Guidance has been shared with Children and Families Service staff who undertake visits or attend meetings with families, children and young people. The guidance was updated in light of it becoming evident that the lockdown was going to continue for longer than originally expected and in line with the latest Public Health England and Government advice. The visits guidance continues to be reviewed and refreshed as relevant.

During the Covid-19 period of restrictions on movement and social isolation measures the vast majority of our visits to children and families are now taking place virtually. Direct visits to children and young people at home with their families or carers are still required in the following circumstances:

1. When a child/young person has suffered harm, or there is an immediate risk of harm to the child/young person that warrants removal of the child from their family (visit to be undertaken jointly with Police)
2. When there is evidence to suggest a child/young person has been harmed, or there is an identified risk of harm and where a direct visit is required to ensure the child's immediate safety, to enable the child to be spoken to alone and to inform the plan and inform ongoing safety planning
3. When we have been unable to make contact with a child or their family for a significant period of time and we are seriously concerned about the welfare of a child
4. When a placement for a looked after child has disrupted and a child needs to be supported in moving to a new placement in circumstances where the carer(s) are unable to facilitate this

In all such cases staff have been advised to adhere to the updated Council guidance on home visits and PPE is used as required.

As outlined in section 3 of the report on the HLT Covid-19 response submitted to CYP Scrutiny Commission for 20th May 2020, significant joint work continues to take place with colleagues in Hackney Learning Trust to review cases rated as 'red' and 'amber' and to liaise with relevant schools to ensure that for each child we identify the most appropriate agreed plan in relation to attendance at school/setting.

First Access and Screening Team (FAST)

Education colleagues from Hackney Learning Trust and additional Young Hackney staff are working on a rota basis within FAST to provide additional advice and support within FAST whilst schools are closed.

Rapid Support Service

Our Rapid Support Service, which provides additional support to prevent family breakdown, and to support placements for looked after children where this is at risk of placement

breakdown, now has enhanced staffing capacity. This is in recognition of the fact that for some of our families there are likely to be increased strains in family relationships in this period of self-isolation. This team is now operating on weekends and bank holidays during the daytime as well as through the normal working week.

Arrangements for young people who are looked after turning 18

Ordinarily looked after children would move on from their foster carer placement to live in supported semi-independent accommodation after their 18th birthday, if they do not want to remain under Staying Put arrangements. We have extended all foster placements during the Covid-19 period so that young people can remain with their current foster families during the lockdown period. This is in line with a letter from the Secretary of State for Education received on Tuesday 21st April (and was Hackney's position prior to receiving this letter).

This principle of supporting young people to remain in their current placements has also been applied to care leavers when they turn 21, although the Leaving Care Service continues to work virtually alongside colleagues in the Council's Housing Needs Service to secure suitable alternative accommodation where possible.

Virtual School for looked after children

The Virtual School is continuing to support all looked after children and is providing additional support to foster carers to provide home education depending on the individual needs of a child.

The Virtual School has created an online learning platform that foster carers and children can access which contains a range of educational and fun activities. It is regularly updated with new content and supports foster carers to provide activities for children. The Virtual School has been ordering laptops for pupils that don't have access to IT hardware and all fostering families have access to the internet to access online learning resources. The Virtual School continues to send books out to children to support their reading.

Children in Care Council (Hackney of Tomorrow) meetings are now taking place virtually.

Young Hackney Online Programme

Since early April, Young Hackney has been delivering an online programme of interactive sessions for young people in the borough aged between 6 to 19 years-old and up to 25 for young people with additional needs. The online hub includes a variety of virtual activities from sports and games to cooking and arts and crafts. Young people also have the opportunity to access confidential advice and support, as well as 1-2-1 drop in sessions with the substance misuse and health & wellbeing teams. Targeted groups also remain available, including those for young carers and their parents.

The range and diversity of weekly online programme content continues to grow, as does the uptake of live, interactive sessions on the online hub.

Child Protection Conferences / Looked After Child Reviews

Child Protection Conferences and Looked After Child Reviews have been taking place virtually since the lockdown measures were introduced. We have been considering the learning from this and there have been some benefits to carrying out conferences and reviews in this way which we will continue to review and explore ways to build these into our 'business as usual' over the coming months.

Virtual Child Protection Conferences have provided an opportunity to think about risk management differently, especially in domestic violence cases where the victim and perpetrator cannot safely be in the same room. Supporting a parent to attend virtually can minimise some of these risks but enable a joined up conversation where all parties are receiving the same message from professionals. It may also offer opportunities for professionals who can find it difficult to physically attend such as GPs, Police, or class teachers, to contribute to Conferences .

Virtual Looked After Child Reviews undertaken via video or conference call have enabled some young people to participate in these meetings in a way which they have not previously managed to when they have taken place face to face. We have found that some young people are more comfortable engaging in a virtual world and whilst this cannot be the only method of engagement, consideration of how to offer different methods of participation to young people in meetings will be considered on a longer term basis. Virtual ICT processes may also offer us the opportunity for parents to engage more in Looked After Child Reviews especially if they are not able to attend their child's foster home or residential home due to safety or travel issues.

Disabled Children Service care and support

We are very conscious that the outbreak of the Coronavirus may affect the ability of carers to support the borough's disabled children, which may place a strain on family resources. We have worked closely with our care providers to confirm the contingency plans they have in place.

Social workers in the team are continuing to carry out welfare checks with families and liaising with other services such as schools who may be offering support to families. We are working with families on a case by case basis to meet children's individual needs. We have encouraged carers who require support around the use of Direct Payments or in relation to queries or concerns about the support being provided by care agencies to contact their social worker by phone or email so the team can support families to agree the best way forward.

We have received positive feedback from a number of parents and professionals regarding the support the Disabled Children Service has provided over the last few weeks, and a selection of these are included below.

Email from a parent regarding increased care package:

"Hi xxx (social worker), thank you very much for all your help and a bigger thank you for listening."

Email from a parent regarding increased care package:

"My goodness. Thank you so much. Thank you thank you. I have tears in my eyes. Thank you for helping us so quickly!"

Email from parent regarding increased care package:

"You don't know what you've done for the family. We're so grateful. Hmmm! You've relieved me of stress and anxiety. God bless you. Continue to have the passion you have now."

Deputy Head, special school, in response to safeguarding concerns:

"I wanted to let you know that I have had a fantastic response from some social workers who have responded very promptly to concerns that we have raised about individual families. In particular xxx and xxx who have really communicated well (and acted quickly) to support the families we have been working with."

Children & Families Manager, Cheredi voluntary organisation, regarding increased care package:

"Dear xxx (CSW), I cannot thank you enough for the care and consideration you are giving to all our families during this unbelievably challenging time. (Mother) had tears of relief when she spoke to her Support Worker."

Short Breaks continues to support families with a flexible offer during the Covid-19 period. This includes the option to spend up to £250 of their allocation to purchase equipment that promotes play and creativity. So far the response has been very positive and parents are pleased they are able to use their short breaks funding to keep their child or young person occupied whilst at home.

Some examples of purchases so far are: trampoline, sandbox, outdoor climbing frame, paddling pool, arts and crafts equipment, board games, a Nintendo Wii, sensory toys/books, karaoke microphone, sports equipment and a bike.

Missing children

When children go missing from home or care we continue to follow the London Child Protection Missing Procedures, developing an immediate strategy to locate the child and, if necessary, holding a full strategy discussion within 72 hours if the child has not returned. When children return from a missing episode they are offered an independent return home interview and if accepted, this is undertaken by video call/ telephone by one of our Children's Rights Officers, or otherwise by the child's social worker. Prior to Covid 19, we established a daily briefing with the Police each morning to review the situation for any children who have been reported as going missing and/or as being at risk of exploitation the previous day or overnight and these daily briefings are continuing to take place remotely.

During the first few weeks of social distancing measures, the number of young people going missing was in line with the period prior to these measures being introduced. By the last week of April, the number of missing children appears to be reducing compared to levels a few weeks ago, however those young people who are continuing to go missing have more complex vulnerabilities and risks. Drug dealing rather than other crimes and/or gang related issues seems to be more prevalent.

Children's Rights Officers are continuing to check in with looked after young people who have a history of going missing and offering support around the frustrations of lockdown and potential additional consequences of going missing in this situation in terms of infection and spreading risk.

Domestic abuse

The Council's Domestic Abuse Intervention Service has adapted its core service delivery to ensure continuity of service while at the same time leading within the Council and across the Hackney partnership on the promotion of a joined up, adaptive and resilient response. The Domestic Abuse Intervention Service (DAIS) remains fully operational and continues to meet what has been a rise in referral rates of around 50% since lockdown commenced. The Council has allocated additional resources to expand the staff team to meet this demand.

The safety planning guidance which DAIS issued some weeks ago to partner agencies to help professionals respond to victims of domestic abuse is promoted regularly. The Council's web page also contains guidance for professionals and members of the public and a social media campaign is also promoting key messages. Posters have been printed and are being disseminated to key locations including parks, pharmacies and shops.

Fortnightly Covid-19 Domestic Abuse Planning Meetings, chaired and coordinated by DAIS and involving statutory partners and domestic abuse services continue to look at how agencies are ensuring the identification and prompt response to victims of abuse, particularly those who experience multiple vulnerabilities, discrimination or disadvantage. Agencies are aware that the true picture of domestic abuse is likely to be largely hidden at this time so the focus is threefold: reaching victims, providing services, and ensuring resilience so that agencies are able to respond to a surge in demand. Thankfully at this stage the message from statutory partners and domestic abuse agencies is that services remain in place and that there is not yet a shortfall locally in emergency accommodation for those who need it (both via refuge provision in London and provided by Hackney Council).

The Council has offered to take on case work of any third sector Hackney domestic abuse agency struggling to manage due to staffing shortages or a rise in demand. The Council's own Domestic Abuse Intervention Service remains fully staffed and contingency planning is reviewed regularly.

Next steps

The Children and Families Service is continuing to provide most services and support remotely, with direct visits to children and families taking place when needed, in line with our updated visits guidance.

The Children and Families Service is currently working on initial recovery planning, with the expectation that the Government will provide more guidance about the easing of lockdown measures in the coming weeks.

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