

Children and Families Service
Update for Scrutiny - 7 September 2020
Update on key performance trends following Covid-19

Introduction

The Children and Families Service has continued to provide critical services to children and families throughout the Covid-19 situation. This paper provides an update on some of the key trends that have been seen in respect of service demand and activity and advises on ways in which practice approaches and services delivery have been adapted over time in response to the Covid-19 situation.

A strategic workstream on *Adapting Support and Services for Children and Young People* chaired by the Group Director, Children, Adults and Community Health, has been established to plan further phases of work and to ensure that a strategic and coordinated approach is taken to planning the second phase of our response to the impact of Covid-19. This workstream is focusing on three key areas: keeping children and young people safe; supporting children and young people through the impact of Covid-19 and setting children and young people up for the future.

Key trends from 23 March 2020 onwards

Decrease in Referrals (including Child Protection Referrals)

There continues to be a significant reduction in the number of referrals received since social distancing measures were introduced, including the partial closure of schools. Whilst referral levels increased slightly following the easing of lockdown measures they have not yet returned to normal levels.

The service received an average of 57 referrals per week from the start of April to 21 August. These weekly averages are 38% lower than the normal weekly average of 92 referrals prior to lockdown (based on April 2019 - February 2020 data).

The service started an average of 22 Section 47 (Child Protection) enquiries per week from the start of April to 21 August, which is 24% lower than the weekly average of 29 Section 47 enquiries started prior to lockdown (based on April 2019 - February 2020 data).

Referral numbers and requests for Section 47 Child Protection enquiries are expected to increase significantly once the schools reopen in September. The Access and Assessment Service increased their staff numbers earlier in the year, by creating two new social work units, so should be well placed to respond to the anticipated increase in demand. Additional capacity from Early Support services and Hackney Learning Trust has also been added to the First Access and Screening Team (FAST) which processes initial referrals.

Increasing pressures

As at 21 August 2020, there were 277 children on a Child Protection Plan - this is an increase compared to the number just prior to the lockdown in response to Covid-19 when there were 258 children on Child Protection Plans (in the first week of March 2020). The rise in numbers is due to a reduction in the number of children ceasing to be subject to Child Protection Plans rather than an increase in the numbers becoming subject to Plans, and is indicative of the challenges that the recent restrictions have presented in undertaking effective work with families to support them to reduce the level of risk to their children.

The difficulties in progressing planned work with families in the current situation are also impacting on the numbers of children remaining open on Child in Need plans and we have seen an increasing in the number of children that are subject to court proceedings due to the challenges of progressing and concluding proceedings, particularly where these are contested or where specialist assessments that can only be undertaken through direct contact with families are required.

As at 21 August 2020, there were 449 looked after children - this is an increase on the number of looked after children before the Covid-19 situation (431 looked after children in the first week of March 2020). There has been a particular increase in the number of 15-17 year olds coming into care during this period. We are developing our responses to working with young people who are on the edge of care, to ensure that the service they receive meets their needs as safely as possible. Some of the increase is also due to Court proceedings being delayed meaning that some children remain looked after rather than progressing to other arrangements.

We are reviewing the chairing capacity for Child Protection Conferences and Looked After Children reviews and continuing recruitment to expand the capacity of the service to ensure we can manage the expected increase in demand.

Domestic abuse referrals to DAIS

Prior to Covid-19 the average number of referrals received by the Council's Domestic Abuse Intervention Service (DAIS) was circa 25 per week. During lockdown (from 23 March to 4 July) the number of referrals to DAIS significantly increased, with an average weekly referral rate of 31 (over 20% rise across the period) with some weeks peaking at a 60% rise (40-41 referrals for two weeks in May, and for the week ending 19 June and 4 July). Since lockdown measures have been eased, the average number of referrals have returned to the pre-Covid average of circa 25 referrals per week (as at 25 August). Case numbers within the service remain high as the needs of individuals are responded to and the additional staff deployed to help manage the rise in demand continue to be in place.

Changes in Practice and Recovery Planning

As lockdown restrictions are eased by the Government, Hackney Children and Families Service have been regularly updating their guidance to practitioners in respect of visits to

children and families to ensure that this is safe for staff and service users and Senior managers are monitoring data on key performance indicators on a weekly basis. Children at risk of significant harm and subject to a Child Protection Plan now have all statutory social work visits undertaken in person face to face with this taking place (with social distancing measures in place) within the family home, at the doorstep/in a shared garden if appropriate, or, occasionally, in a public space such as a local park if there are no significant concerns about the home environment.

As part of the Council's response to the Coronavirus crisis, the general advice to staff is that they should continue to work from home where possible. However, many of our frontline practitioners cannot perform key aspects of their role from home and, when people are out doing visits to families, they sometimes need a base to return to. From Wednesday 29 July 2020, 21 desks were made available at Hackney Town Hall for Children & Families staff to use. Plans are being pursued to increase the amount of space available for staff going forward.

The Youth Offending Teams have kept in regular contact with the young people they are supporting and are undertaking an increasing number of face to face visits. Stratford Youth Court reopened on 6 July and there has been a steady growth in the size of court lists, requests for pre sentence reports and new youth justice orders. We expect slightly more court business to be progressed, with September and October likely to be particularly busy in terms of assessments, court reports and new sentences.

Young Hackney Youth, Play, Sports and Business Support staff worked closely with Health and Safety colleagues to adapt services and successfully reopen our youth hubs, adventure playgrounds and borough-wide youth sports programme on the 29th July. The team worked collaboratively with Council colleagues and voluntary sector partners to ensure children and young people have access to a wide range of activities and support this Summer. The service is now into the fourth week (as at 21 August) of a really successful programme of activities for 6-19 year-olds (and up to 25 with special educational needs). To date our four youth hubs have worked with 530 children and young people, who have made 1,800 attendances.

Commissioned VCS youth organisations and adventure playgrounds have been supported to adapt their delivery and to reintroduce physical delivery and online activities. All youth and play providers have had to make significant changes to the ways services are delivered to ensure they are compliant with their COVID secure status, these include shortening or adjusting session times to accommodate safe staff travel and enhanced cleaning regimes, reduced participant capacity, the introduction of 'bubbles of participants' and increased staff to young person ratios.

The digital devices for children with social workers and care leavers that were pledged by the DfE in April arrived in the first week of July and we have worked closely with colleagues in Hackney Learning Trust to distribute these. Whilst most were distributed via schools, 270 have, so far, also been directly distributed by our social work services.