

Name of meeting: Children's Scrutiny Panel
Date: 2nd July 2020
Title of report: Impact of Lockdown on the number of children in care and what has been done to keep vulnerable children safe.

Purpose of report

The purpose of the report is to ensure that board members have a Service Update with regards to the provision of services to vulnerable Children, Young People, their families and their carers During COVID 19. It also provides a wider overview of the actions and steps taken to ensure that children in Kirklees are safe and contact is maintained during the current emergency.

Key Decision - Is it likely to result in spending or saving £250k or more, or to have a significant effect on two or more electoral wards?	NA
Key Decision - Is it in the Council's Forward Plan (key decisions and private reports?)	NA
The Decision - Is it eligible for call in by Scrutiny?	NA
Date signed off by <u>Strategic Director</u> & name	
Is it also signed off by the Service Director for Finance?	NA
Is it also signed off by the Service Director for Legal Governance and Commissioning?	NA
Cabinet member portfolio	Cllr V Kendrick Children's Portfolio

Electoral wards affected: All

Ward councillors consulted: No

Public or private: Public

(Have you considered GDPR?)

Yes GDPR has been considered. The information in this report does not identify any individuals.

1. Summary

Supporting the Workforce

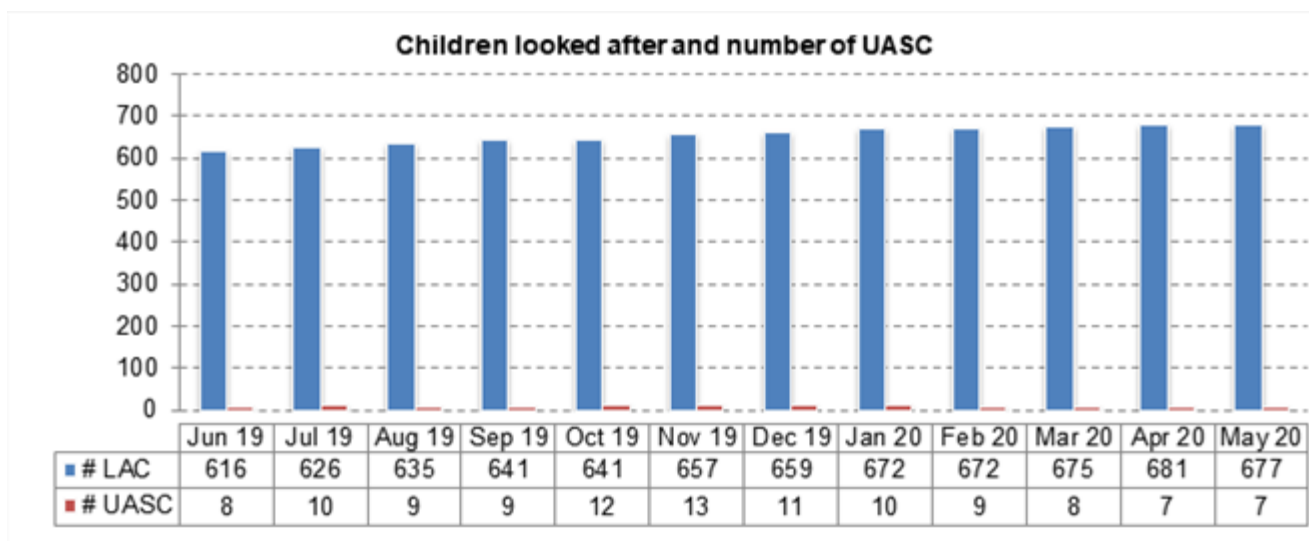
A range of measures has been undertaken to support the workforce across a range of services including managerial support, check-ins, prioritisation clarity and advice on dealing with Covid-19 presenting clients. Additional evidence has been provided to Covid-19 Corporate co-ordination team in relation staff rotas and establishment of staffed rotas. The number of staff in each service base has been reduced to ensure we have more than adequate space for Social Distancing (2 meters apart). Initially there were a number of staff who were self-isolating however since Easter there has been an increase in staff returning from self-isolation and being available to work. Staff and teams continued to be deployed to the areas of greatest need.

Social Workers who are working from home are updating records, care plans and assessments. They continue to contact children, parents, carers and professionals through use of technology such as skype, 'WhatsApp' trying innovative ways to maintain good relationships with their children and families and continue direct communication with children.

Team Managers, Service Managers and Heads of Service are maintaining visible leadership on each worksite, working on a rota basis to ensure Social Workers and Managers have direct access whilst in work to discuss cases where concerns may be escalating to ensure safe, swift and accountable decision making takes place in a timely manner.

As time is progressing Social Workers are finding working from home increasingly difficult. They have raised issues in respect of feeling isolated and concern regarding not providing consistency for the children and families they work with. We are taking their concerns very seriously and are currently reviewing how we can increase Social Workers within work settings. This will be based on the Governments Guidance on the next phase whilst also ensuring safe distancing and infection control measures.

Children Looked After:



The numbers of children in care at the start of lockdown was 675 there was a slight increase by the end of May 2020 to 677. On the 19th June 2020 the numbers of children in care were 691 this increase is due to two sibling groups.

Social Workers have continued to undertake statutory visits to children who are in the care of the Local Authority. As within the Assessment and Intervention part of the Service each Team Manager, overseen by the Service Manager for the area, have RAG rated and risk assessed to ensure those at most risk or vulnerability are given priority. This has been regularly reviewed during the lockdown period and amended to ensure that children and young people continue to receive a service to meet their changing needs when appropriate.

As with children and young people within Assessment and Intervention Risk Assessments have taken place in relation to all Children Looked After and their attendance at school. The risk balances the view of the School, carers, Social Worker and the voice of the young person. The assessment is fluid and decisions continued to be reviewed based on what is in the best interest of the child or young person.

Keeping in Touch Co-ordinator - Children in Care

At the start of the lockdown period the Children's Rights Team (CRT) contacted every Kirklees Looked After Child (age 7+) and Care Leaver by letter, to ensure they knew how to contact the service if they wanted advocacy / support. The Keeping in Touch Coordinator is following these letters up with all children and young people who do not currently have an Advocate, to enquire after their health and wellbeing, directly with the child/young person and /or their carer. Independent Visitor's remain in contact with children and young people via several social media platforms, to maintain relationships and provide independent emotional and practical support to young people.

The team has also set up a 'Challenge' competition in response to the Covid-19, as a tool to keep in touch with children and young people looked after. The Children's Rights web page is updated each Monday morning with the new challenge. The links to the website are posted on the team's Facebook and Twitter page and an email is sent with the links to the Fostering Team and Kirklees Fostering Network who share the challenge with their contacts. There are 4 winners each week receiving a £10 high street voucher. All entries receive a certificate. One positive from the challenge competition is that the CRT Team have had a number of children enter that the team had no previous involvement with.

LAC Reviews- Children in Care.

As a response to Covid 19 all Review meetings for Children Looked After have been held virtually. A key priority for this change in service delivery has been to ensure that children's views and voices were heard. Independent Reviewing Officers have addressed this change by working in partnership with the Children's Rights Team and the service has utilised a variety of tools to communicate with children to gain their views. In particular, older children have presented as more able and willing to be involved in their Review meetings when provided with the opportunity to join virtually. The option for young people to participate in their Review meetings virtually or phone, is a Service development that will be retained to support and enable their participation in the Review Process.

Children's Residential homes and short break settings

Covid-19 has been particularly challenging for residential homes in relation to the day to day operations. Our front line staff have endeavoured to ensure of children's homes have continued to operate as normally as possible whilst managing COVID related risks. In relation to staffing we have experienced some challenges including some staff who are shielding and unable to complete their duties from home and increased sickness levels due to staff anxiety in relation to some challenging behaviours from some children that increase

the risk of COVID transmission. Public Health guidance and advice has been sought including infection control; The NHS guidance has been followed and staff have worked tirelessly to try to ensure that young people are following the guidance to reduce risk of Covid-19 in our homes. This has been a challenge particularly in the disability homes as due to personal care needs and children not understanding the guidelines, PPE has been necessary to keep staff and children safe. We have risk assessed all establishments and, in several situations, involved Infection Control to offer their support. We have utilised staff from other services where they are unable to undertake their usual roles and have built a temporary bank of staff to be deployed to fill gaps. Twenty one staff from Kirklees Active Leisure have been working across the service to support vulnerable children; they have had an enhanced DBS check and have undertaken online induction training.

Additional placements have been created within inhouse provision which includes using Orchard View as a mainstream home with a variation to their statement of purpose. The application to register Crescentdale as a children's home has been submitted to Ofsted; there has been a delay with the Manager's DBS, but this should be processed shortly. We will be looking at other options for a further temporary residential home to broaden our sufficiency capacity once Crescentdale is returned to Adult Services on 24th July. We are also in the process of identifying a suitable house to buy to use as a children's home; this will be used for additional capacity and some temporary capacity in the first instance. A floating support manager will start on 3rd July; his role will include supporting Orchard View in the first instance and the set up of new homes as well as considering the set up of a solo provision for the child currently in Healds Road. We are in constant communication with Ofsted around the changes.

We reviewed our short breaks provision in line with social distancing and lockdown measures. We did this with infection control and took the decision to temporarily suspend the services. We risk assessed all the families receiving short breaks provision to identify which families were most at risk of breakdown and therefore in most need of support. The Young Persons Activity Team who normally deliver a service within a building for children with a disability have suspended their group work and are now offering support to families in other ways. KAL staff who can no longer undertake their usual roles have been offering regular support as have care agencies whose regular work cannot take place. The next step for respite services is to consider how they can reopen safely – a piece of work has commenced to consider this including having children in 'bubbles' which is how schools have managed their offer. An advocacy and participation officer is currently undertaking a piece of work with all families who access short breaks to find out more about the experiences of support during Covid-19 and how this can shape our future offer.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children

We are maintaining our approach to this group and supporting them in their placements. Visits are being continued and risk assessments updated. Careful consideration is given in relation their age and legal developments. We are adhering to the government's guidance in relation to the extension in timescales for completing an age assessment.

Care Leavers

Personal Advisors continue to undertake visits to Care Leavers. Each Team Manager/Leader, overseen by the Service Manager for the area, have RAG rated and risk assessed each individual young person to ensure those at most risk or vulnerability are given priority. We continue to deliver food parcels including toiletries to our Care Leavers. We are still making a number of extra financial payments to include young people who are waiting for their first universal credit payment, hardship payments to those who've had additional costs due to the extra food/ travel to shop/ keeping in touch costs. This has helped

to provide support to young people who have lost their jobs and been laid off or put on furlough but have still not received any monies.

Some young people have chosen to self-isolate and have expressed their wish not to have a direct visit in these situations we have been using social media in order to ensure that we have regular contact.

We are working with Young people in order to complete their housing applications and we are working closely with housing services with regards to being able to provide suitable accommodation when young people will be able to move into their own tenancies.

Foster Carers Support

In the initial stages of lockdown, the importance of the foster carers' role and their professional judgement has been recognised with specifically tailored advice for the carers and other professionals. Regular communication and joint meetings have been maintained between senior managers and KFN ensuring that issues arising from the COVID-19 situation are addressed in a prompt and timely fashion. Advice has also been provided to Foster Carers individually and through the Kirklees Foster Carers Network in relation to COVID related matter.

Work was also accelerated in relation to a wider foster carer offer to help with stability, retention and recruitment. We have increased in line with inflation both allowances and skills payments. The service is also considering additional one-off payments reflecting additional costs faced by foster carers and their households during this time.

We have accelerated the supply of laptop/devices to Foster Carers to help with better and more appropriate communication. We have also ensured that children in foster placements have access to laptops to support their learning.

A number of additional steps have been taken to support carers and increase capacity:

Emergency foster placements

To address rapid placement breakdown in a Covid-19 period, emergency foster places are required in order to place children quickly in a secure home environment until a long-term solution can be found. In recognition of the skills required, we have introduced an enhanced payment structure for emergency placements at £100 per night, in addition to the regular payments. Emergency foster carers may already be caring for other foster children, but they may have a spare room, or they might be dedicated solely to emergency placements.

Increasing Foster Carer Capacity

To make the most of existing carer capacity, carers who are registered for a higher number of children than they currently can take on extra placements, where it is safe and appropriate to do so. They will automatically receive the additional child allowance and the amount of fostering allowance for a child of that age. This can be paid as an emergency placement payment, which would pay a higher rate for older children (8 years plus).

The Fostering Service has also taken advantage of some relaxation in Fostering Regulations to help speed up recruitment by recreating carers through the Connected Person regulations ensuring all the relevant checks and approvals remain in place.

Council and school staff as Foster Carers

The engagement of Council and school staff as emergency foster carers has been explored. These employees in appropriate Council and School roles will already be DBS checked and are willing to be fast tracked into the service. This has seen a number of additional Foster Carers identified and recruited.

There are other services developments which will support foster carers such as the development of an Out of Hours service which will help with potential placement breakdown. We have also ensured additional, more frequent contact to foster carers with support from Supervising Social Workers, in the form of additional video /telephone calls.

Managing the needs of children with complex needs during the restrictions can be more challenging and the fostering team and the wider support network have reviewed and broaden all the support they can provide to carers, during this period.

Adoption Services

We are working with the Regional Adoption agency in line with government advice to maintain services as much as practical in the current situation. There had been potential issues with partners in relation to medicals for prospective adopters and this has now been addressed. The adoption service are working with transition plans that are in line with the government guidelines in relation to contact.

2. Information required to take a decision

No decision is required, this report is submitted at the request of the Board to monitor the number of children in care. This report is also shared with the Children's Scrutiny Panel on a monthly basis.

3. Implications for the Council

3.1 Working with People

Not applicable

3.2 Working with Partners

Not applicable

3.3 Place Based Working

Not applicable

3.4 Climate Change and Air Quality

Not applicable

3.5 Improving Outcomes for Children

This information is provided at the request of Corporate Parenting Board to monitor the number of children in care their age and location of placements.

3.6 Reducing demand of services

Not applicable

3.7 Other (eg Legal/Financial or Human Resources)

Not applicable

4. Consultees and their opinions

Not applicable

5. Next steps

A similar report will be presented to future meetings of the Corporate Parenting Board.

6. Officer recommendations and reasons

That the report be noted.

7. **Cabinet portfolio holder's recommendations**

Not applicable

8. **Contact officer**

Julie Bragg, Head of Corporate Parenting

9. **Background Papers and History of Decisions**

Previous reports to the Children's Scrutiny on number and age of children in care.

10. **Service Director responsible**

Elaine McShane, Service Director (Child Protection and Family Support)

Tom Brailsford, Service Director (Resources Improvement Partnerships)