

CSF – Departmental Update

Supplementary slides presented to
Children and Young People's Scrutiny Panel
January 2021

Schools/Early Years Update

- **Nurseries/Early Years:** Under national guidance, nurseries and early years settings remain open for all children. A small number of Merton nurseries have had to close due to Covid-related staff sickness and isolation.
- **Merton schools:** are open to vulnerable children and the children of key workers in all year groups. We are meeting weekly with secondary, special and primary headteachers to identify key issues they are facing and to help them problem solve.
- **Mass asymptomatic testing using Lateral Flow Devices in schools** – secondary schools have started this. Plans for it to start in primary schools in the next few weeks. The testing of secondary pupils within special schools is being planned in partnership with our health partners to ensure that this can take place in a way that is safe for pupils and causes the least distress to the pupils
- **Digital Devices and remote learning:** All schools have now been given the chance to order their allocation of Digital Devices from the DfE. Some schools are reporting that this will be adequate for their pupils' needs, others are reporting that they need more. Schools are also sourcing devices from charities such as Keeping Kids Connected (the Dons). All schools have moved to remote learning for the majority of their pupils. Remote education offers have developed since the last lockdown (for example all secondary schools are reporting a degree of live lessons in their offer now). The Government and Ofsted have issued guidance about remote learning: it should include aspects of online provision (for example pre-recorded videos, as well as potentially live lessons).
- **School Attendance:** no longer compulsory, but for vulnerable children is 'expected' and will be encouraged.
- **Free School Meals:** for benefits related FSM children not attending, schools are providing a £15 per week supermarket voucher
- **School admissions:** Children put on roll even if they need to start remotely. Secondary offer day as normal on 1 March 2020

Special educational provision and youth work

- **SEND:** Special Schools remain open for all children. We are working closely with our maintained special schools and health partners to ensure that pupils can attend safely during national lockdown. The Government has not made temporary changes to special educational needs and disability legislation (Section 42 of the Children and Families Act) during the current Tier 5 restrictions. This means that the LA and the CCG is required to deliver the provision outlined within a pupils Education Health and Care Plans and comply with the statutory timescales for phased transfers, new EHC Needs Assessments, and Annual Reviews
- **Home to school transport:** No covid-related impact. Service running as per government Covid guidance for lower number of SEND children attending provision
- **Youth Work:** Under National Youth Association Guidelines all youth centres and the Adventure playground must be closed. They have moved to virtual support. We have continued to track and support children who are out of education, training and employment. Catch 22 and Art Against Knives are commissioned to provide detached youth work across the borough. We are discussing with them setting up our Lockdown detached team who previously went out and engaged young people to support social messaging about safety.

The Views of Children and Young People

- Throughout the lock-down our youth services have been collecting feedback from children and young people. This feedback has not been systematically analysed but here is a flavour of what they have said.
- Children and young people have told us the following:
 - They have enjoyed not feeling the pressure to be in school/college v worried about falling behind
 - They have liked being able to stay at home and sleep in and have found on-line lessons all day exhausting
 - Children and young people are missing physical activities/trips seeing their worker in person (we have continued contact sessions for high risk young people) are feel isolated from their peers/friends.
 - Children and young people are missing seeing friends and want youth clubs to be open
 - Children and young people have valued online workshops we have provided, learning new things, and making new friends online, many have requested we run more of these. Some voiced reluctance to do online work at the end of a day of on line school

• **Introduction**

- Staff anxiety about visits to children and families is high due to increased transmission of Covid-19 new variant
- In the third lock-down there is a greater expectation nationally that face-to-face visits should continue. Practitioners continue to be creative in the way in which they engage with children and families and our staff continue to go the extra mile to support children and families.
- We are working to maintain staff resilience by reviewing case loads regularly and considering ways to support our staff.
- In December, 267 (49%) of our visits were undertaken in person. 276 (51%) were undertaken virtually.
- We are better at managing the impact of Covid having learnt from the first two lock-downs. However, there are additional challenges in the third national lock-down announced earlier this month, including:
 - A greater infection rate, and evidence that more staff are incapacitated due to Covid
 - Greater service pressures: There are 200 additional children in receipt of services from CSC (as at the end of November 2020). This requires additional oversight and leadership capacity. We have therefore deployed additional service managers to manage these pressures.
 - A continued expectation to manage business as usual functions during this period.

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• **MASH / First Response**

- MASH is stable and continues to function as usual.
- First Response – there are staffing implications due to Covid. Of the 20 social worker establishment 5 are not available for work due to Covid-19 infections/isolation. The Business Support function has also been affected in this service area.
- Staff absences together with increased demand for services has increased caseloads: 282 children and families are allocated across 15 Social Workers (avg. 19). This is not distributed equally and masks the fact that newly qualified social workers are required to have reduced case loads of ca. 5 children. Therefore some experienced social workers are working with a higher number of children and families (in the mid- to high-20s).

Children's Social Care Update (contd)

• **Safeguarding and Care Planning**

- Staffing in the service is stable although there are vacancies which are being recruited to. There are 2 staff members who are impacted by infection or isolation.
- All children have risk assessments to inform frequency and type of visits
- There is an increase of children with child in need and child protection plans within the service which is placing pressures on social worker caseloads. Caseloads are higher than optimum levels with some experienced social workers holding responsibility for 25 children.
- Additional social work and operational leadership resource is being mobilised to ensure caseloads and decisions for children are safe and manageable

• **Children in Care/Resources Team**

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No Covid-19 issues. Service is stable. One member of staff absent due to Covid infection in the fostering service.

The number of children supported has increased over the last couple of weeks. Agreement the earlier transfer of children into the service to reduce pressures elsewhere in the system (court work).

- Ongoing partnership work to secure timely delivery of Initial Health Assessment and Repeat Health Assessments.

• **Care Experienced Young People**

- No Covid-19 issues. Service is stable. One member of staff absent due to Covid infection.
- Face-to-face visits only happening where a risk-assessment deems this to be necessary. All other visits are happening virtually.
- During the lock-down our Personal Advisors were having increased contact with our care experienced young people.
- Care experienced young people are receiving their winter-grant. We are paying additional allowance to care experienced children to support meeting increased costs of food, internet access and heating costs.

• **Adolescent Family Service**

- No current C-19 staffing impact. Service is stable. Practitioners continue to find creative ways to engage with children and young people in the context of the lock-down.

Children’s Social Care Update (contd)

- **Youth Offending Service**

- No current C-19 staffing impact. Service is stable.
- The service is working under the recovery plan submitted to the Youth Justice Board.
 - Courts are operating
 - Visiting children face-to-face in secure settings is challenging and based on risk. Alternative virtual methods are being used.

- **Quality Assurance and Professional Development (QAPD)**

- No current C-19 impact. Some staffing absences in the reviewing service presenting challenges in the context of increasing number of children on child protection plans.
- The service is providing online virtual training. This training cannot be delivered at the same intensity and rate compared to group learning models.

- **Business Support Team**

- 3 covid-related absences in the Business Support Team.
- The Business Support Team has overseen the roll-out of devices to vulnerable children.

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Table 1: Device Allocation overseen by BST (January 2021)

Device	DfE Allocation	Total Allocated	Available Stock
Laptop	396	253	143
Tablet	50	43	7
4G	75	34	41
Total	521	330	191

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