

Covid-19 Update - Early Years, Early Help and Children's Social Care

Date: 13th October 2021

Report of: Director of Children and Families

Report to: Scrutiny Board (Children and Families)

Will the decision be open for call in? Yes No

Does the report contain confidential or exempt information? Yes No

What is this report about?

Including how it contributes to the city's and council's ambitions

- As the city continues to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic, this report provides the Children and Families Scrutiny Board with an update on the focused work being undertaken to support children and young people in Leeds through our early years, early help and children's social care services.
- In addition, this report offers an update to members to reassure that local authority officers have continued to provide support and resources to children, young people, and families as detailed at previous board meetings, throughout the summer and will continue to do so in September and beyond.
- There will be significant, immediate, and longer-term impacts of Covid-19 on the health, wellbeing and support of our children, young people and their families. It is recognised that some groups have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic including those children, young people and families who need early help and social care services.
- Finally, as board members will be aware, [The Best Council Plan](#) has the aspiration for Leeds to be a child-friendly city. The [Leeds Children and Young People's Plan](#) (CYPP) explains this child friendly approach in greater detail and sets out eleven priority areas of work and three key obsessions. In addition, our *early help approach and strategy*, [Right Conversation, Right People, Right Time](#) sets out our ambition is to ensure that all children, young people and their families in Leeds receive the help they need as soon as they need it from people they know already.

Recommendations

- a) Scrutiny Board members are asked to have a full and informed discussion around the information in this report. Local authority officers will be present at the board meeting to provide appropriate inputs and to respond to questions.

Why is the proposal being put forward?

- 1 During the pandemic, Scrutiny Board has received regular updates from Children and Families Directorate on the numerous avenues of support being offered to children, families and learning settings.
- 2 The impact of the pandemic has been significant, and it is recognised that some groups have been disproportionately affected.
- 3 A separate report has been provided to Children and Families Scrutiny Board with an update on the focused work being undertaken to support learning settings to support the learning of children and young people in Leeds.

What impact will this proposal have?

Wards Affected:

Have ward members been consulted? Yes No

Early Years and Childcare Providers

- 4 There continues to be over 1,300 active childcare registrations in the city, the majority being private organisations or individuals who are self-employed. Although nationally there are reports of the sector experiencing significant setting closures and childminder resignations, the number of settings de-registering in Leeds is comparable to pre-pandemic years.
- 5 The vast majority of settings have been open since July 2020 when restrictions were lifted, and they remained open during the lock down measures affecting schools in the Autumn (2020) and Spring (2021) terms. Take up / attendance at childcare settings continues to be mixed. Settings based in the city centre continue to see lower than usual take up, however other settings report significant waiting lists, demonstrating the varied experience across the sector based on the type of setting or the location and parental demand.
- 6 The local authority funds childcare providers for children aged 2, 3 or 4 years old under the Funded Early Education Entitlement funding (FEEE) and this funding returned to the normal approach (funding per term based on the number of children attending and the number of hours claimed) in January 2021.
- 7 Senior Officers from Children and Families plus the Executive Board Member for Children and Families continued to meet monthly with all providers to offer sector specific updates and to respond to questions up until May 2021. Since then, it has been agreed to continue to meet half termly and extend the remit to include the early years reforms and curriculum changes implemented from September 2021.
- 8 Early Years providers have repeatedly expressed the view that the national focus on schools, in the press and media, political statements and guidance and policy has left them feeling overlooked and undervalued.
- 9 The Early Years Learning Improvement Team and the Family Information Service continue to be the contact for providers seeking advice, support or clarification on DFE guidance.

- 10 A case monitoring system has been in place since Autumn 2020 and this monitors and tracks confirmed cases of Covid-19 to offer support and advice to settings where needed and to support public health colleagues in identifying outbreaks.
- 11 In early years' settings the focus continues to be on effectively managing the issues and uncertainties the current situation brings. There is some anxiety about having children and staff in settings where they have been a close contact of a positive case and providers are concerned about the impact this could have on case numbers. Staff shortages remain an issue as there are still some staff who need to self-isolate where there are positive cases. There are also recruitment challenges in terms of the number and quality of applicants for early years vacancies.
- 12 Professional development and quality improvement have not been a priority for settings over the last 18 months and Ofsted inspections have been suspended for this period. Inspections have now resumed, and settings are working to ensure that they are once again fully meeting the learning and development statutory requirements. In addition to this, the introduction of early years reforms, a new statutory framework and early years curriculum will present significant challenges for providers during the coming year.
- 13 Early years settings are beginning to see the impact of the pandemic on their children's learning and development. Many providers report that children's communication and language skills and their social development have been negatively impacted as children have had reduced opportunities to play, talk and socialise. Transition arrangements for settling children into new settings or school have also been impacted and this has affected how quickly and easily some children have settled into new routines and provision.
- 14 Moving forward, the collaboration with NESTA as an innovation partner, will provide a timely opportunity to begin to address some of the issues that the pandemic has exacerbated. The programme will explore ways to secure better engagement with parents and families and improve outcomes for children, particularly in communication and language.

Childrens Centres

- 15 *Little Owls:* All 28 sites are now open (since the last report which stated there were 29 sites, a Delegated Decision was made to close the childcare provision at Little Owls Firthfields and to reconfigure this site to enhance family services in the area); take up has increased although new working patterns and location of potential customers is uncertain in the post pandemic market and we continue to offer the maximum amount of childcare that we are able to, based on current staffing levels. The changes implemented on 16 August has meant that the numbers of staff and children needing to self-isolate has significantly reduced; however, many staff have only had their first vaccination so self-isolation for those has meant that some sites have had to temporarily offer reduced hours and new admissions have had to be delayed due to staffing levels. Lateral flow testing is undertaken twice weekly by all practitioners. There have been a few isolated positive cases recently but none requiring outbreak management support.
- 16 The core risk assessments for each site are in the process of being reviewed in line with the Corporate core risk assessment. COVID outbreak management funding has enabled the service to introduce Pro-active COVID audits which have been undertaken at each site to quality assure that all protective factors are still being implemented and as a supportive measure for the teams.
- 17 Recruitment within the childcare sector continues to be a challenge and is slow due to market conditions, not only for Little Owls but locally and nationally. Little Owls vacancy factor combined with sickness and COVID related absence as well as maternity leave is a significant pressure both on staff well-being and financial sustainability. The shortage of

childcare staff is impacting on occupancy levels and has significantly limited the number of new children being admitted in this Autumn term.

- 18 At the beginning of 2020/21 financial year, the business was in lockdown. Nurseries were initially only permitted to offer places to key worker's children and those defined as vulnerable. Little Owls Nurseries operated in Hubs to stretch the staffing and minimise infection levels. Occupancy was very low, and income plummeted across all sites. The focus now is on business recovery. Work is underway to develop a 3-year business plan for the Little Owls provision to ensure the financial sustainability can be monitored closely and a marketing strategy is in place to improve the market visibility, including the online presence of Little Owls.
- 19 A recruitment plan has also been produced to explore creative and innovative ways in which we can attract people to join the workforce and following the success of the childcare apprenticeship programme, a delegated decision was taken to enhance this further which will result in three cohorts per year which should go some way to improving staffing levels.
- 20 A well-being action plan has also been developed for the service to ensure the mental health and well-being of staff remains a priority particularly given the pressures that the workforce currently faces.
- 21 The childcare teams had been making use of family services delivery space to enable them to hold staff breaks in a safely managed way due to many staff communal areas being limited for space; as family services are resuming face to face activity careful negotiation is taking place between managers to share the space as effectively as they can.
- 22 We are working with the Library Service on their early years offer; the focus over this term will be on the under - fives programme i.e refresher training on the stories and rhymes sessions and relaunching these, relaunching their Ready Steady Readers booklet, invite to join the library to go out with birth registrations and trying to get the Story Buses out on the road, in the first instance trialling stops at Children's Centres in priority areas. This will contribute well to the NESTA project where the focus is on improving speech. Language and communication outcomes for children.
- 23 *Children's Centre Family Services:* Face to face delivery of family services has resumed with a commitment to building on the opportunities presented to us during the pandemic and delivering a blended offer of face to face and virtual services. Autumn timetables have been produced, face to face groups are now being delivered and have been received very positively by families.
- 24 The Baby Steps team and the Family Support and Parenting team are continuing to deliver parenting programmes virtually and have also started to plan for face-to-face delivery very soon. Virtual groups are also taking place to deliver PBB (Preparation for Birth and Beyond) and HENRY; these programmes are co-delivered by children's centre family outreach workers and 0-19 Family Health Practitioners.
- 25 Site risk assessments are currently being reviewed in line with the Corporate risk assessment & Managers have been asked to individually risk assess their buildings to determine capacity as some of our sites have limited space for staff in office/ communal areas with limited ventilation. Although the 2m social distancing has been lifted they are advised to remain cautious & limit occupancy in enclosed, less ventilated areas. Some additional COVID outbreak management funding has been made available to us which will enable us to carry out similar COVID pro-active audits across the family services teams.
- 26 *Baby Week:* is scheduled to take place 15 – 21 November 2021 and the theme this year will be '*Strengths and Struggles*' and this can reflect on the last 18 months for pregnancy,

wellbeing and early years in general. Instead of a one-day conference, we will be hosting two shorter webinars. We already have Robin Balbernie booked as our keynote speaker focusing on early communication, brain development and attachment. This year we are hosting Baby Week collaboratively with Bradford, Cheshire & Merseyside & there will be opportunities for Leeds practitioners to access webinars hosted by these other Local authorities too. Work is underway to develop a website for Baby Week & this will contain an events function where Children's Centres can advertise their activity programme. We hope to deliver some focused activity on the Baby Buddy app, particularly as version 2 'conception to 1 year' has now launched & also promote take up of the 2-year FEEE. This is an event to really look forward to, to celebrate babies & their families across Leeds & a real opportunity to re-engage with families, some of whom will have babies who were born during lockdown & have little experience of accessing services in Children's Centres, so we intend to make it a Baby Week to remember.

27 *Parenting Strategy:* Through the Early Help Board, a parenting work stream has been established to bring together partner expertise, knowledge and skills using a co-production approach to determine the current parenting support offer across the City, define the types of delivery, make recommendations to support the ambition for an evidence-based parenting offer and develop a coherent 0-19 (25) parenting strategy. The work stream is accountable to, will report to and take feedback from the Early Help Board.

28 *Communication:* as our teams are working to a hybrid model or transitioning back to the workplace, it is more important than ever to ensure the workforce feels connected. Throughout the pandemic, Service update meetings have been taking place on a fortnightly basis with trade union colleagues, regular forums are taking place virtually for managers as well as front line staff and weekly bulletins have been circulated across the entire workforce sharing key messages, updates and information on health and well-being; the Service intends to maintain this approach going forwards as it has been very well received.

Early Help

29 *The Early Help Hubs* continue to receive high numbers of referrals from Duty and Advice and clusters. There has been an increase in demand for the substance misuse coordinators and support relating to domestic violence and abuse continues to be high; there has also been an increase in the need for services to address parental conflict. Support relating to mental health also continues to be in high. Clusters have seen another spike in referrals for both family support and low-level emotional support (6-8 sessions of counselling).

30 *The Families First Team* are working together with the resettlement team to coordinate donations for the refugees from Afghanistan and working together to develop pathways of support for the families. The team are also working with the BabyBank to identify premises and launch locally based drop in/ pick up centres which will make the service more accessible for families.

31 *The Gypsy Roma Traveller Team* are working to tackle health inequalities amongst the Roma Community and have been supporting the COVID vaccine programme by visiting communities and offering the vaccine along with Public Health England. The team have launched drop ins for Roma families in Nowell Mount Children's Centre and The Compton centre to support with needs they identify. They are also working together with the library service to take the story bus out to roadside encampments to engage with children. The team are working together with the library service to deliver 'conversation classes' (pre ESOL) to the Roma community and engage them with the services the library can offer to their children. There is a lower uptake of children's centre offers within the Roma community; the team are therefore promoting Early Help and attendance at Children's Centres with the Roma community, and 'hand holding' families to initially attend.

- 32 *The Multi Agency Response Service* are continuing to support families in crisis where the need arises, and family support workers are continuing to support the Emergency Duty Team over the weekend and bank holidays to prevent children/young people's situations escalating where possible.
- 33 *Staffing* has remained relatively stable with the majority of people having had 2 vaccines. Teams are working in a blended way with a combination of home and office working. Staff have continued to work undertake direct work with families in a Covid secure way throughout the pandemic. Bronze meetings have continued to take place in the South, West and East of the City promoting a join up of services across the partnership.
- 34 *Workforce development:* The Early Intervention Qualification has been running virtually since May 2021 with a dedicated cohort and this is progressing well. EPEC (Empowering Parents Empowering Communities) has started running again for the first time since the pandemic began and there are plans to deliver this across the City. Funding for Transitions: Triple P has been granted by the DWP which will support the training of 30 practitioners to deliver an evidence-based programme to work with separated/ divorced parents.
- 35 *Innovation:* We have been successful in a bid to the Data Accelerator Fund, partnering with Bradford. This will enable children's social care to utilise data to enhance strong practice and partnership to deliver improved outcomes. An evaluation of the Early Help Hubs is underway in conjunction with Ecorys, the Early Intervention Foundation and the Department for Education. This is an opportunity for Leeds to influence early help practice, nationally and consider outcomes for families as a result of the Hubs intervention.
- 36 *Family Group Conferencing and Kinship Care:* Referrals to the Family Group Conferencing teams across the city have been lower than usual but face to face meetings are now being facilitated for families that want them.
- 37 Referrals for assessment of potential kinship carers continue to be at an all-time high. Kinship Care teams are also working hard to provide ongoing support to families who are struggling with the impact of covid. We are seeing families being impacted financially and also regarding access to housing due to lack of movement in the housing market during pandemic. Lots of families have struggled with reduced face to face support from universal services and this has resulted in some impact on placement stability. However, the number of placement breakdowns remain very low.
- 38 *Youth work teams* have continued to support young people and families during the pandemic in line with government guidance. Where young people cannot be seen face to face due to risks associated with Covid, risk assessments are in place to ensure they continue to be safeguarded and they are seen and spoken to via other methods such as video calls and telephone calls.
- 39 The *Leeds Pathways Team*, supporting young people that are NEET, has also been predominantly contacted young people through telephone or Skype meetings. While this was viewed as a barrier in the first instance, it became clear that young people were answering their phones much more often. Also, the parents of young people were also much more willing to engage on the phone where under usual circumstances, they would have been unlikely to come to the drop-in centres. This has resulted in parents being able to provide even more encouragement and support to their child in following our advice.
- 40 A key focus of many of the *Youth Service* provisions is to engage with young people and address local issues with respect of anti-social behaviour. For several reasons throughout recent months, we have seen an increase in anti-social behaviour across a number of local hotspots. All of the Youth Work Teams deliver a range of interventions to address these issues. A recent example is from the Outer North East team. Young people reported to

workers that they missed attending centre-based provisions and in particular the world food cooking sessions that were being delivered prior to the pandemic. To address this opportunity to adapt and respond to the needs of local young people, the team established a pilot project which saw Youth Workers deliver outdoor cooking programmes, which attracted high number of participants and was really successful.

- 41 Now that restrictions have been relaxed, the Youth Service has been able to return to building based provision, where it is possible to do so, and this has been welcomed by the young people and communities.
- 42 *Youth Work Activity Centres:* Earlier in the year the activity centres delivered a lot of work with children's social care teams including providing activity days for the residential homes, foster care teams, youth justice service, care Leavers, individual children looked after and young people with additional needs taking up short breaks.
- 43 Overall, the centres' bookings are now starting to get back to roughly what they were pre-pandemic. Activity sessions with schools and other groups are strong however residential bookings are still slow with some schools feeling reluctant to book for overnight stays. This potential nervousness of some schools may take a little while to overcome.
- 44 During the school summer holidays - the West Leeds Activity Centre team ran a Healthy Holiday programme, a short breaks holiday programme (for young people with learning difficulties) for the first three weeks of the holidays then a mainstream holiday club for the last three weeks. There was a holiday club for children looked after, a fostering (Mockingbird group) activity day, motorbike sessions for children looked after and lots of other healthy outdoor activities including canoeing on the canal, bushcraft sessions, inflatable games and climbing.
- 45 The Herd Farm Centre ran many activity days for youth groups, schools and private organisations and hosted a Leeds Rhinos Foundation NCS group doing a social action project.
- 46 South Leeds Youth Hub had its busiest summer so far averaging an attendance of 45 young people each day and up to 100 on one day. This included hosting a Healthy Holiday programme, an Endorphins group, Breeze, Dazl and delivering activities to foster care groups.
- 47 Lineham Farm worked with a number of families open to MST through the Lineham Charity.

Social Care

- 48 **Social work** - Since the report of 3rd February 2021, all statutory services have continued to operate with most social work practitioners working from home except for those undertaking duty tasks. In July 2021 the social work service began a phased return to office working where space and accommodation has allowed. The social work teams have continued to visit children, young people, and families during the pandemic in line with government guidance. All visits to children are now face to face except in circumstances where a child or family member has covid or covid symptoms. Most family time sessions for looked after children are also face to face, safeguarding meetings, such as child protection conferences continue virtually at this stage.
- 49 Numbers of contacts to the front door are similar to the numbers seen in 2020. Between 05/08/21 and 09/09/21 contacts reduced in line with the school holidays as is often seen in the summer period. The social work service has however seen an increase of 115 referrals over the same 6-week period when comparing 2020 and 2021, with a significant increase in referrals from schools at the week beginning 09/09/21, which continues to rise.

- 50 As such social work teams are seeing an increase in the level of work they are managing. Family's needs are complex and multifaceted and there is an increase in the numbers of families experiencing domestic violence and abuse. The impact of poverty on families is more acute than it has been throughout the pandemic.
- 51 Most social work managers and practitioners have received both their covid vaccines however there continue to be individuals effected by covid and some with long covid which impacts on staffing levels still.
- 52 The Children and Families directorate has recently established a Recovery Board which is being chaired by the Director of Children and Families. The board will focus on the areas needed to secure the future, to create the conditions for social work to flourish and to address the challenges being faced as a result of the pandemic.
- 53 In July of this year the Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conference (MARAC) process was improved by the implementation of a daily risk assessment meeting (DRAM). This has been a joint approach between Leeds City Council departments and the Police. The DRAM provides an early opportunity for partner agencies to safeguard people affected by domestic abuse; and provides a triage stage for the MARAC. These processes work seamlessly together to reduce the risk of serious harm and increase the safety and wellbeing of victims and their children.
- 54 On 20th and 21st July this year Ofsted completed a Focused Visit of the Children and Families front door services. The visit was carried out under section 136(2) of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 (EIA) as part of Ofsted's 'Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services' Framework (ILACS Framework).
- 55 The delivery model was adapted to reflect the COVID-19 context. Inspectors were on site and held face-to-face discussions with some local authority staff. Inspectors also used video calls for discussions with local authority staff, managers, and leaders.
- 56 Ofsted two-day Focused Visits evaluate an aspect of service, a theme, or the experience of a cohort of children. Unlike a full standard or short Inspection of Children's Services Ofsted two-day Focused Visits do not result in a graded 'judgement' or full inspection report; rather inspectors report their findings about strengths and areas for improvement and outline these in a published letter.
- 57 Ofsted inspectors identified several strengths in social work practice and early help in the Focused Visit; and highlighted three recommendations for practice improvement. Inspectors found no areas of serious weakness and no examples of children being left unsafe. The three recommendations for improved practice are:
- The quality and consistency of assessments to ensure that key information and family history is gathered and analysed to inform decision-making, and the quality of children's plans.
 - The quality and impact of management oversight and supervision to ensure that decisions are timely and well recorded.
 - The quality and independence of audits to ensure that they provide learning to support improvement in social work practice and provide senior managers with an understanding of the quality of that practice.
- 58 In response, Children and Families Directorate have developed and implemented a Focused Visit Improvement Action Plan, this was felt to be the best option to address the recommendations from Ofsted, the plan will be monitored through directorate's existing

performance management and quality assurance framework and newly established Recovery Board.

- 59 **Children Looked After and Care Leavers teams:** both our Care Leavers and Children Looked After Social Work Teams have continued to work throughout the pandemic delivering services through home visits and via office arrangements as necessary.
- 60 Like all services, our teams have experienced periods of staff sickness and staff isolation, however the services have managed to maintain effective levels of contact and support. Risk assessments for incremental face to face working and restoring teams to office environments have been updated and support through the advice and guidance of the corporate H&S teams.
- 61 Our Care Leaver and Children Looked After services have maintained good outcomes for children during the pandemic. Our children have been supported to access school or to access online education provision.
- 62 **Fostering Service:** our Fostering Service has continued to recruit new carers and support existing carers through online support groups. Those groups are now migrating to in person formats, and we are currently consulting with our carers about the support they want and are looking for. Our enrichment work and placement support work has resumed as and when covid restrictions allow, with a full and busy schedule of activities over the summer.
- 63 **Children's Residential Homes** - The local authority's children's residential homes remained open throughout the pandemic and have continued to provide a range of residential services including:
- Specialist Secure Residential placements for national referrals,
 - local, mid to long term children's homes for children currently requiring group living and
 - our specialist homes providing care and support to children with complex needs and disabilities.
- 64 Since the previous report to Scrutiny Board, we have experienced a temporary closure (10 days) of one of our homes due to a covid outbreak and the children were supported to appropriate alternative provision during this time.
- 65 Staff and Visitors to our homes are required to take LFT tests in every 24-hour period of coming into other homes and staff continue to work with the children in the homes to encourage covid safe behaviours.
- 66 All homes have been adequately equipped with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and have direct access through the government's programme of support to the sector, as well as fast access through arrangements within Leeds City Council. The homes continue to follow current guidance on the use of all PPE.
- 67 Staffing levels across the homes has continued to vary as staff have been required to isolate, or in some cases tested positive, though we have reduced the need to rely on redeployment of suitably skilled and trained Youth and Youth Justice Staff. There continues to be a small number of staff required to isolate following contact with covid positive people which indicates that they have not accessed vaccination. Given the nature and sensitivities in respect of enquiring about individual vaccination status we are not able to confirm the overall vulnerability to staff though we continue to encourage all staff to access the vaccine and provide health advice and fact-based information to support this.

- 68 Ofsted reintroduced their judgement-based inspection programme in April this year and since that time we have had seven homes subject to inspection with four judged to be good and three judged to be outstanding. In these inspections our arrangements for managing the pandemic and consequent risks have been acknowledged to be strong, appropriate and effective.
- 69 All appropriate procedures continue to be followed including liaising with Public Health England and working alongside Health and Safety, Human Resources and Occupational Health teams to ensure that homes are effectively advised, and act on any changes in guidance. Work also continues with colleagues in the Trade Unions to ensure that communication and reassurance is effective.

What consultation and engagement has taken place?

- 70 Service leads have been consulted in providing this update paper.

What are the resource implications?

- 71 Given the significance of the financial implications of Covid-19, arrangements are in place for the Council's Executive Board to receive separate and more detailed reports regularly. The Council's Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board maintains oversight of the financial management strategy in accordance with its remit.
- 72 The Covid-19 pandemic is unprecedented and as such, Children and Families Services has redeployed resources to areas of need with the highest priority and resources will be deployed appropriately to ensure support can be given where the most impact can be made for children, young people and their families across Leeds, with a focus on those who have been disproportionately affected.

What are the legal implications?

- 73 This report has no specific legal implications.

What are the key risks and how are they being managed?

- 74 The risks related to Covid-19 will continue to be monitored through the Council's existing risk management processes.
- 75 Children and Families Services has business continuity plans across 20 key areas of the directorate and many of these plans inform the critical responses to Covid-19.

Does this proposal support the council's 3 Key Pillars?

Inclusive Growth Health and Wellbeing Climate Emergency

- 76 Providing the right support at the right time, the local authority enables children, young people, and their families to succeed and for their outcomes to improve. This in turn will have the potential to have a significant positive influence within the Inclusive Growth Strategy for Leeds as children and young people who have successful futures will add their wealth of talents in contributing to the city's economic growth.
- 77 The health and wellbeing of children, young people and their families is central to the support that is provided by early years, early help and social care services.

Options, timescales and measuring success

a) What other options were considered?

78 N/a

b) How will success be measured?

79 Early years, early help and social care services will continue to use qualitative and quantitative methods to understand the impact and response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

c) What is the timetable for implementation?

80 It is proposed to bring regular updates to the Scrutiny Board in order that members can see progress being made.

Appendices

81 None

Background papers

82 None