

Children and Families Services Covid-19 response and recovery

Date: 16th February 2022

Report of: The 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

- This report provides the Scrutiny Board with an update of the continuous programme of work being undertaken by Children and Families Services in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **Children and Families Services Leadership Team** continues to communicate regularly and proactively with staff at all levels and with key stakeholders to identify and address emerging issues related to Covid-19. The leadership team has developed the Children and Families Covid-19 Transition Plan 2021-22 to set the conditions for success in the pursuit of improving the lives of children and families in Leeds within the context of the pandemic. The plan can be seen in **appendix 1**.
- The local authority's **children's residential homes** continue to remain 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. This report also provides information on testing, personal protective equipment (PPE), staffing, quality assurance and monitoring and the current 'Covid Status' of homes.
- All **Early Help** services remain fully operational. There is an increased need for support across all services, in particular mental health support and parental conflict. Early Help is supporting area social work teams in identifying additional support for children; this includes considering the capacity of intensive family support services, the youth offer and children's centres when children are subject to a statutory plan. This report also provides information on the Nesta partnership, the Triple P - Positive Parenting Programme, and the work being undertaken by the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Team and Compassionate Leeds colleagues.
- The majority of **Early Years** settings continue to report high demand for childcare, although some locations, such as settings in the city centre, are seeing less demand than pre-Covid due to work location of parents. All 28 Little Owls sites have remained open and continue to

offer the maximum amount of childcare they are able to, based on current staffing levels. This varies across sites and may mean in some instances that hours are reduced, and places are prioritised for critical workers and vulnerable children only. This report also provides information on the recently launched Early Years Foundation Stage Framework, an in-depth look at Little Owls and information on Children's Centres Family Services.

- An increasing number of **schools** in Leeds are reporting high rates of staff absence due to the Omicron variant. Although this has not yet resulted in any school closures at the time of writing, schools are increasingly utilising mitigation measures outlined in their Outbreak Management Plan to manage the situation. Staff absence will undoubtedly disrupt the continuity of learning despite leaders' best efforts, and further draw on their time as they seek to make arrangements to cover absence. This report offers more information on the impact of the Omicron variant in schools along with the other main issues of vaccinations, contingency arrangements for examinations in 2022, the recovery curriculum, Learning Improvement support and other ongoing support, an update from the Learning Inclusion Service and School Admissions.
- The response to Covid-19 is continually evolving and as such, there may be additional information to be presented to the Board by elected members responsible for the Children and Families portfolio and from senior officers from the directorate.

Recommendations

The Scrutiny Board is asked to consider the information in this report and determine if there are appropriate areas of focus for the Board's work schedule in 2022.

Why is this information being put forward?

- 1 Updates have been provided by the following service areas which fall within the remit of the Children and Families Scrutiny Board:
 - Children's Residential Homes
 - Children's Social Care / Early Help
 - Early Years / Childcare Provision
 - Schools
- 2 **Children's Residential Homes**
- 3 The local authority's children's residential homes continue to remain 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.
- 4 **Testing**
- 5 All homes have systems in place for the testing of staff and children where they present with symptoms. Each home also now has a supply of the 'PCR' type Covid tests to be used if it is impractical to use the major testing sites. The homes currently have good access to lateral flow device (LFD) tests through the DfE, which has played a key role in keeping ahead of infection control and outbreaks.
- 6 The secure children's home, Adel Beck, includes a registered school as part of the provision and as such has also been provided with lateral flow device tests which have been used for staff as advised since the beginning of January. Indications of positive tests are then referred for PCR tests until this requirement was removed where a positive lateral flow test had been returned. Staff are currently required to undertake twice weekly lateral flow tests, unless an outbreak has been declared in which case they are required to test daily as a minimum, until the outbreak has ended.
- 7 All our homes have access to LTD Tests. There is a specific route to access these through DFE for all registered children's homes.
- 8 **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)**
- 9 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.
- 10 Staffing levels have been maintained through the deployment of suitably skilled and trained Youth and Youth Justice Staff and the recruitment of casual and agency staff where the service has experienced reduced staffing levels due to Covid related absence. The service has also recruited social work students on placement and newly qualified social workers. Staffing establishment levels have been maintained through the continuous recruitment of residential staff throughout the pandemic with interviews taking place following safe practice guidance.

- 11 Given the critical necessity to maintain staffing levels at all times in children's homes, plans have been put in place to ensure that the directorate maintains effective staffing levels to support the continued essential work of its homes. Planned contingencies include the redeployment of suitable staff from less essential roles within Children's Social Care.
- 12 Residential Children's Services continue to monitor all additional cost pressures associated with safe management in this time. Staffing levels continue to be monitored along with the projected impact of any further identified staffing shortfalls to enable effective mitigation and planning for future circumstances.
- 13 Quality Assurance and Monitoring
- 14 Independent scrutiny considering the quality of homes provision has continued throughout the pandemic both virtually and, within the last two months, through on-site visits to the homes from independent visitors reporting directly to Ofsted. Ofsted has continued to provide full and interim inspections to homes. Two new Service Delivery Managers have been appointed who provide further support across the community homes and drive practice expectations whilst offering a higher level of support to both the operational and strategic delivery of the estate.
- 15 Current 'Covid Status' of Homes
- 16 Since the last report to the Scrutiny Board, for non-secure homes there have been 106 instances of staff isolating due to being contacted by Track and Trace service and 22 staff who have tested positive. The number of children testing positive across the community estate in the period has been 1.
- 17 At the time of reporting Adel Beck has experienced 3 declared outbreaks, since the last report. The most recent outbreak, which began officially on 4 January 2022, was removed from outbreak status on 27 January 2022 as per guidance issued by UKHSA. This was due to there having been no cases of connected infections in the home over 10 days and the home was able to revert back to pre-outbreak measures to continue to be protected.
- 18 During this outbreak 21 staff isolated, 12 returning a positive result. 13 young people were tested of which 9 returned a positive result. Regular meetings were held with the UKHSA and contact maintained with infection prevention and control. It is clear that the Omicron variant is highly transmissible, and this significantly increased the number of positive cases within the home compared to previous outbreaks.
- 19 Since February 2021 at Adel Beck, 64 staff members have isolated due to either being an identified contact, symptomatic or positive. Of those 64 staff members, 38 have returned a positive result. Most staff returned to work fit and well following their isolation period, however 3 staff remain unwell with 'long covid' and are being supported by managers, HR and trade unions. There are 57 young people who have been PCR tested due to either being admitted to the home or showing symptoms. Of those 57 young people, 16 have returned a positive result. These young people have self-isolated for the duration as advised by UKHSA and formally through Public Health England (PHE). They have been supported by care and The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) staff throughout their period of isolation and maintained contacts via Zoom and telephone calls.

- 20 Appropriate procedures have been followed including liaising with UKHSA who chaired an Incident Management meeting which declared the situation to be an outbreak in respect of current guidance and have provided clear guidance, support and oversight.
- 21 Since Tuesday 11 January 2022, no further positive test results have been recorded.
- 22 Colleagues continue to work alongside Health and Safety, Human Resources and Occupational Health to ensure that homes are effectively advised, and act on changes in guidance. Work also continues with colleagues in the trade unions to ensure that communication and reassurance is effective.
- 23 **Children's Social Care / Early Help**
- 24 All Early Help services remain fully operational. There is an increased need for support across all services in particular, mental health support and parental conflict. Most services have waiting lists from cluster to intensive family support services. To try and mitigate the impact we are offering online support such as the Triple P (parenting programme), Silvercloud (online support for parents & young people with SEMH) and drop-in sessions / conversations with children and families to offer support until a service is available.
- 25 Allocations meetings for intensive family support are seeing a greater shift to more complex cases including child protection and Public Law Outline (PLO) cases.
- 26 Early Help hubs and other services continue to work closely with all partners to support the most vulnerable children and young people. Partnerships have been strengthened during the pandemic, particularly with local third sector partners. Three Early Help practitioners and an Early Help Team Manager are now working at the front door safeguarding hub to add capacity and ensure that early help is provided at the earliest opportunity.
- 27 We work closely with Family Action who support young carers in Leeds. There is an active working group which is well represented by all agencies including health, CSWS, Adult social care and other third sector partners.
- 28 Seacroft cluster has been successful in a joint bid with LS14 trust around Early Help in child criminal exploitation and knife crime.
- 29 We continue to participate with Young Lives Leeds, sharing learning and joint working.
- 30 Staff continue to provide additional family support to the Emergency Duty Team although this is becoming increasingly challenging with reduced capacity across services due to the pandemic.
- 31 Many services have increased the digital offer and have a focus on digital inclusion. There is ongoing work with libraries to fully utilise digital approaches and explore opportunities for more joint working.
- 32 Triple P (Positive Parenting Programme), an online programme for parents, has proved to be popular and the EPEC (Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities - parenting programme) has also commenced again, face to face.

- 33 In response to increased parental conflict, additional practitioners have been trained in Family Transitions (Triple P's parenting programme) to support this area of need.
- 34 The NESTA partnership has been extended to a three-year partnership (Fairer Start) and is a collaborative programme with York and Stockport local authorities. In Leeds the focus is on early and successful engagement with children and their families, improving our outcomes in speech, language and communication, implementation of PEEP (Peers Early Education Partnership) and looking at how we increase the take up of our two-year childcare offer.
- 35 Families First team have been working with Leeds Gate to support Afghan families who are staying at the hotel with simple top tips regarding parenting.
- 36 The Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Team continue to support the Gypsy Roma Traveller (GRT) community through a joined approach with Public Health England to support the vaccination programme. The team are also supporting Home Office referrals in relation to the European Union settlement scheme when they have been unable to locate children thought to be in the city; this has relieved some of the pressures on social work teams, particularly in the east of the city.
- 37 Early Help is supporting area social work teams in identifying additional support for children; this includes considering capacity of intensive family support services, the youth offer and children's centres where children are subject to a statutory plan.
- 38 We have submitted a joint partnership bid for the Family Hub Transformation Fund and to the Youth Endowment Fund.
- 39 As part of the Household Support Fund vouchers have been distributed to under 4's eligible for early years pupil premium and the two-year-old offer.
- 40 Compassionate Leeds Colleagues in Early Help are involved in developing a trauma informed city. Through integrating input and resources in health, early help, social work, and education support, a three-armed approach is being developed that includes training, consultation, and access to intervention around the recognition, prevention, and treatment of the impacts of traumatic events and adversity in children and families.

41 **Early Years / Childcare Provision**

- 42 There are over 1300 actively registered childcare providers in the city, the majority being private organisations or individuals who are self-employed. Most providers are open to families as normal, although the surge in cases experienced over Christmas and into the new year is impacting on staff availability and leading to some partial or temporary closures.
- 43 The majority of settings continue to report high demand for childcare, although some locations such as settings in the city centre are seeing less demand than pre-Covid due to work location of parents. There continues to be a somewhat varied experience across the sector based on the type of setting or the location and parental demand.
- 44 The local authority funds childcare providers for children aged 2, 3 or 4 years old under the Funded Early Education Entitlement funding (FEEE). Since Spring 2021, all childcare settings have been funded as normal, according to the number of children they have attending.

- 45 Senior officers from Children & Families plus the Executive Board Member for Children and Families meet half termly (previously monthly) with all providers to offer sector specific updates and to respond to questions. Providers have repeatedly expressed the view that a national focus on schools has left them feeling overlooked and undervalued.
- 46 Early Years Learning Improvement Team and Family Information Service continue to be the contact for providers seeking advice, support, or clarification on updates to DfE guidance.
- 47 A local authority case monitoring system continues to monitor and track confirmed cases of Covid-19 to offer support and advice to settings where needed.
- 48 Staffing is a huge concern across the sector, with settings advising that they are struggling to recruit the trained staff they need, and that staff turnover is high. Children & Families are exploring ways to effectively stimulate the market to encourage people to enter into the childcare profession. In addition, as settings experience high staff turnover and sickness absence, they need ongoing support to ensure that the safeguarding implications are fully considered.
- 49 The new statutory Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework was launched in September 2021 and has resulted in a shift in focus for settings towards the learning and development requirements of the EYFS. Settings are being offered targeted support to ensure that gaps in training and development, experienced due to the pandemic, are prioritised wherever possible. The recent spike in cases has impacted this somewhat but is expected to recover as case numbers fall.
- 50 Ofsted inspections of Early Years settings restarted in September 2021. There have been concerns expressed from some providers that these have not taken into account the challenging situation that settings continue to face, particularly in relation to the current stability and capacity of staffing. From the Spring term, however, settings have been advised that they are able to defer an inspection if they feel this is necessary due to the impact of Covid. Any setting that receives an 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' judgement will continue to be supported with their post-Ofsted improvement plan by the Early Years Improvement Team.
- 51 Lateral flow testing continues to be recommended for all early years' staff, and while there have been supply and ordering issues with the DfE facility, settings continue to advise that staff are regularly testing twice weekly.
- 52 Children's Centre Little Owls Childcare Provision
- 53 All 28 Little Owls sites have remained open and continue to offer the maximum amount of childcare they are able to, based on current staffing levels. This varies across sites and may mean in some instances that hours are reduced, and places are prioritised for critical workers and vulnerable children only. Sites have had to reduce operating hours when staff have tested positive or had to remain at home to care for their own children with Covid-19. Some staff have had to remain at home as their own childcare / school arrangements have been affected by Covid-19.
- 54 In addition, some staff have chosen not to take up the vaccination or not yet had a second vaccine, so have been required to isolate for 10 days if directed by track and trace. These absences have impacted on some centres' ability to open for all children. Where staff are

taking up the vaccine, there have been some short-term absences due to vaccine side effects.

- 55 Where staff have tested positive for Covid-19 generally they are absent from work for longer than the 10-day isolation period and there has been an increased number of staff requiring longer phased returns to work as they manage ongoing fatigue; some staff have received a long covid diagnosis. Reduction in staffing has resulted in a reduction of hours for some children who are in receipt of FEEE.
- 56 Vacant posts: Staff recruitment is beginning to pick up but continues to be a pressure particularly for the Spring intake of children. The number of people being recruited is slowly increasing but this is not keeping pace with people moving to new posts and the volume of suitable candidates applying is still quite low. The service attended the recent recruitment fair in Kirkgate Market and planned to hold events in shopping centres in the new year. This was temporarily put on hold because of increasing infection rates.
- 57 Risk assessments continue to be reviewed and visits are arranged with health and safety colleagues to determine whether there are any particular factors which have contributed to the rise in positive cases in certain sites and to ensure all protective measures are adequate. Lateral flow testing is available to all staff and face coverings continue to be worn in communal areas. Other protective measures are also in place, such as limited footfall from visitors.
- 58 Parental hesitancy no longer appears to be affecting attendance levels; low occupancy tends to be due to Covid-19 absence.
- 59 Little Owls fees - It has been agreed that during the pandemic and until the resumption of standard operations, any child attending a Little Owls setting who is required to self - isolate by the NHS/Government due to Covid-19 track and trace, is awaiting a test or has had a positive test will not be charged fees until they are permitted to return. We also agreed that parents would not be charged in the event that we are unable to provide a service to them. Where we are continuing to provide a service, it has been agreed that parents will be expected to pay their fees at 100% as per their terms & conditions unless there are clear reasons not to, which should be made on a case by case basis. This arrangement is still in place but it would seem timely to review this as it has had a significant impact on financial sustainability.
- 60 Ofsted have now resumed Early Years inspections and to date Inspectors have visited Little Owls Chapeltown (Judgement of Outstanding across all areas) and Little Owls Gipton (Judgement of Good across all areas). Both settings managed to retain their Ofsted rating which is a remarkable achievement given the challenges of the pandemic.
- 61 Covid Outbreak Management Funding
- 62 Funding was secured to establish a Covid-19 reporting/recording system for all Early Years settings, and this continues to be used to capture and monitor Covid cases across all Early Years settings.
- 63 Funding was also secured to undertake pro-active Covid-19 audits across all Early Years settings to ensure all protective measures were being adhered to.

64 Children's Centre Family Services

- 65 All Children Centre Family Services sites have been signed off as Covid-19 secure and are now open; some sites have had to reduce operating hours when staff have tested positive or had to remain at home to care for their own children with Covid. In addition, some staff have chosen not to take up the vaccination or not yet had a second vaccine, so have been required to isolate for 10 days if directed by track and trace.
- 66 There continues to be a number of vacant posts and Covid related staff sickness which means ongoing pressure across the service.
- 67 Despite this pressure Children Centre Family Services teams are undertaking home-visits, children's centre sites are continuing to offer space for family time and partner agencies have now returned to deliver a range of services such as Baby Hubs, midwifery clinics, food clubs and groups for adoptive families.
- 68 Families have welcomed the delivery of more face-to-face services such as baby groups and Stay and Play sessions; Covid risk assessments have reduced capacity in some buildings so some services have to be pre-booked with smaller numbers. The Baby Steps team and the Family Support and Parenting team are delivering both virtual and face to face parenting programmes. Virtual PBB (Preparation for Birth and Beyond) is being delivered by Children's Centre Family Outreach Workers and 0-19 Family Health Practitioners. Face to face delivery has been placed on hold as 0-19 PHINS (Public Health Integrated Nursing Service) colleagues are being asked to support Leeds Community Healthcare services. HENRY (Health, Exercise & Nutrition for the Really Young) which is co-delivered by Children's Centre Family Outreach Workers and 0-19 Family Health Practitioners, is being offered both virtually and face to face.
- 69 Further funding was secured to obtain £15 Asda vouchers which have been distributed to vulnerable children aged under 2 years. A further batch of vouchers has just been secured and will be delivered during the coming weeks.
- 70 The service secured funding to purchase digital devices; an iPad loan scheme has been developed alongside library services to enable digitally excluded parents to engage in online courses, such as Baby-Steps, Incredible Babies, Incredible Toddlers, Understanding your Baby, HENRY and Starting Solids. Additional baby-massage training and streaming equipment has meant that baby-massage has been offered virtually. In addition, smart phones have been purchased for Family Outreach Workers so they can access translation and other apps whilst out in the community. Covid-19 safety messages have been delivered as part of the virtual engagement with families.
- 71 The 'People' training has been completed and a meeting was held last week. Each children's centre group who took part have been allocated £1,000 for resources. The groups will be facilitated from January 2022. A new parenting group has been set up called Peep. The programme aims to support parents to improve their children's development by making the most of everyday learning opportunities through listening, talking, playing, singing, and sharing books together.
- 72 A priority this year is to reignite the plans for the co-location of 0-19 Public Health Integrated Nursing and Midwifery Services into children's centres to further enhance the integrated working with family services teams.

73 Communication

- 74 During such unprecedented times when many of our teams are working more remotely, it is more important than ever to ensure the workforce feels connected. Service update meetings continue to be held 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 are being circulated across the entire workforce sharing key messages, updates and information on health and wellbeing.
- 75 To support the wellbeing of our workforce, a health and wellbeing action plan has been developed for our service area outlining the wellbeing offer available to all staff; this is in recognition of the impact that the pandemic has had and continues to have on the mental health and wellbeing of everyone and reflects feedback from the staff surveys.

76 Schools

77 How is the current Omicron variant impacting on schools?

- 78 An increasing number of schools in Leeds are reporting high rates of staff absence due to the Omicron variant. Although this has not yet resulted in any school closures at the time of writing, schools are increasingly utilising mitigation measures outlined in their outbreak management plan to manage the situation. Staff absence will undoubtedly disrupt the continuity of learning despite leaders' best efforts, and further draw on their time as they seek to make arrangements to cover absence.
- 79 Face coverings are no longer recommended to be worn in classrooms and teaching spaces for staff and pupils in year 7 and above. In addition, since 27th January, face coverings are no longer recommended for use in communal areas for staff and pupils in year 7 and above. Many school leaders have significant concerns about the high numbers of pupils and staff currently testing positive for Covid. Headteachers have the final say in whether they consider young people and staff should continue to wear face coverings and this is a decision which is being taken through schools considering their individual context and the number of cases they are experiencing. The use of face masks in individual settings will continue to be one of the measures that can be taken to reduce transmission in the case of significant outbreaks as per a setting's outbreak management plan. Staff and pupils can continue to wear appropriate face coverings as a personal choice and they are still being worn where it has been identified in an employee or pupil risk assessment as a necessary control measure for that individual.
- 80 The DfE have advised school leaders that if operational challenges caused by workforce shortages make delivery of face-to-face teaching impossible, they should consider ways to implement a flexible approach to learning. Flexible delivery involves using all the school's available teaching and non-teaching workforce to maximise on-site education for as many pupils as possible while others receive remote education. This should only be on a short-term basis and schools should return to full-time in-person attendance for all pupils as soon as practicable.
- 81 The local authority has advised leaders to contact the Learning Improvement Team or the Health and Safety Team to discuss their situation if they believe a full or partial school closure may be necessary.

- 82 On Tuesday 4th January, the Prime Minister announced that 100,000 key workers would be expected to take a lateral flow test every day. Clarification was sought from the DfE about whether this was to include teachers and support staff in school, and they informed that it would not. The advice remains that leaders should encourage staff to test twice a week. Schools are also advised to encourage pupils to test regularly. In secondary schools, all pupils who consented took an on-site LFD test prior to returning to full time lessons.
- 83 Considering the new guidelines, the Leeds City Council Health and Safety Team revised the risk assessment document provided to schools and schools reviewed and revised their outbreak management plans.
- 84 Vaccination
- 85 Last term the Leeds Vaccination Programme Team visited every secondary setting in Leeds to administer vaccines to consenting 12–15-year-olds. This process was comparatively smooth. The local authority organised a Q&A session prior to the start of the programme which was a useful opportunity for leaders to voice any concerns they had about the administration of the programme.
- 86 Whilst the logistics of the programme were smooth, a number of headteachers had to deal with some potentially difficult situations. The local authority provided legal advice for some who received threatening letters. In addition, officers made contact with the Police to ensure there was a low-key presence outside the school gates where protests had been planned.
- 87 At the time of writing, 17,481 (47%) of eligible young people in Leeds aged 12-15 years have received a first dose, which is in line with the rest of the country. Over 11,000 of these (63% of the total so far) were delivered in schools.
- 88 In January 2022, the government announced that 12–15-year-olds were to be offered a second dose of the Covid-19 Pfizer vaccine. There is an expectation that second doses will be primarily delivered in schools. The vaccination team is once again contacting leaders to arrange on-site sessions this term. In addition to providing second doses, any outstanding first doses required will be administered at these sessions.
- 89 Contingency Arrangements for Exams in 2022
- 90 The government has given school leaders advanced notice of what contingency arrangements would look like should GCSE and A-levels be unable to go ahead in summer 2022.
- 91 It confirmed that if exams are cancelled, a teacher assessed grade (TAG) would be used. The guidance outlined certain protocols which schools should adhere to whilst gathering evidence to be used in determining TAGs. The protocols aim to ensure that there is increased rigour and standardisation in the evidence used by all settings when compared to the two previous years when exams were cancelled.
- 92 Teachers should assess pupils in exam-like conditions on content that they have been taught. This means that pupils would not know the questions beforehand, they would work independently, and the assessments would be timed and supervised.
- 93 The assessments could take place in a classroom. Pupils would not have access to books or revision notes unless they would have access to such resources in the summer exams, for

example, formulae sheets in physics. A centre should either assess all of its pupils who are taking a particular qualification using the same material at the same time or using different materials at different times. Assessments should be similar to the exam papers pupils would take in the summer. These could be part or full exam papers. They should be marked in line with the exam board approach.

94 Teachers have been advised to gather evidence throughout the year in the eventuality of TAGs becoming a necessity. A number of schools, therefore, are having exam style assessments once per term. However, schools have been warned against over-assessing pupils. Pupils must be told before they take each assessment that their performance in it will be used as part of the evidence to determine a TAG if exams are cancelled. Pupils should be told which parts of the subject content will be covered by the assessment, but they should not be told the questions in advance or be able to predict the questions from information given to them. Pupils should not be given the opportunity to repeat an assessment which would then count towards their TAG.

95 The Recovery Curriculum and Learning Improvement Support

96 We have previously shared our approach with scrutiny board in supporting schools in their work with pupils who have missed large amounts of learning due to the disruption caused by the pandemic. This primarily focusses on three main areas.

97 The first key aspect to recovery is an unremitting focus on reading. That means making sure that all pupils are proficient in decoding words and that they then develop into fluent readers so that reading is not a barrier to learning, but rather the gateway to learning.

98 As a result, all primary schools in Leeds have been offered a 'deep dive' in reading. Currently, there are 84 deep dives in reading booked. Secondary schools are being offered a package of reading inference training which they can use as a focussed and time-limited intervention to support pupils with gaps in their reading comprehension. This intervention can be particularly beneficial for cohorts with English as an additional language (EAL), especially those new to English. The SENIT team are also making available training on how to support pupils who have special needs in their reading. Reading is also the first priority of The Refreshed 3As Plan and was identified as a priority area by education leaders in the city during the 'Big Conversations' in Summer 2021.

99 The second area is to support leaders to design and deliver a strong curriculum where there is an emphasis on the key concepts that aid progression.

100 Primary schools can opt for a curriculum review instead of a reading deep dive and 32 primary schools have so far chosen to do this. We have also made curriculum the subject of a citywide conference for primary teachers on 1st March 2022. There will be input from local, regional, and national colleagues on curriculum design with a particular focus on foundation subjects.

101 All local authority maintained secondary schools in Leeds have four days of adviser support, of which two days need to be used for curriculum reviews. The Leading Learning Partnership (LLP), our traded offer which most schools in Leeds buy into, has, for the last year, and will for the coming year, focus on ensuring all pupils receive an exceptional curriculum through high quality teaching and learning.

102 The final key aspect of our recovery approach is developing expert assessment in the classroom so that teachers understand what pupils know, what they know securely and what

misconceptions they have. There are many pupils who have gaps in learning, or whose knowledge is insecure due to Covid disruption. Teachers need to identify what these gaps or areas requiring reinforcement are. We have organised a conference for secondary practitioners, also on 1st March, which will focus on how teachers systematically check for understanding and respond appropriately.

103 On-going support

104 Since late March 2020, we have supported schools on Covid related matters through a single point of contact service (DCS Alert), regular director bulletins and meetings with school leaders. We have also worked closely with a range of internal local authority teams and external partners in prioritising the response and support provided to schools. These support arrangements remain in place.

105 Learning Inclusion

106 In December 2021, Leeds City Council was responsible for maintaining 5023 Education Health and Care Plans (EHCP), more than double the number in 2016 when there were 2287 EHCPs. This represents over a 105% increase.

107 Demand on the service continues to be high and between 1st January 2021 and 13th December 2021 there were 1012 initial requests for EHCPs, many of which may not convert into an EHCP but will need to be considered, processed and advice to parents and schools given regarding a graduated approach to meeting needs within the SEND code of practice.

108 The Special Educational Needs Statutory Assessment Provision (SENSAP) service structure comprises of 35 full time equivalents (FTE) with a range of duties including statutory assessment, reviews, quality monitoring and funding for inclusion casework. Individual caseload is approximately at 300 per FTE caseworker. In addition, the capacity of the team is significantly reduced with long-term sickness absences, Covid related absences and vacancies. This picture of rising demands for EHCPs and reduced capacity is being seen across the country and is not unique to Leeds. Ofsted inspections in local authorities and feedback from national forums suggests a caseload of 200 is manageable dependent on the complexity of the individual cases held. We have developed a “100 day” plan to address these issues which has three key priorities—to improve communication to families and partners to support our values; to prioritise statutory deadlines and core work of the team; to improve professional and individual wellbeing that addresses workloads, responsibilities and capacity. As part of priority three we have commissioned MENCAP as an EHCP writing contractor and are recruiting temporary locums to the team while further recruitment takes place. We have also been successful in an invest to save bid to reduce the need to request an EHCP as well as adding further capacity to the team.

109 Staffing capacity in Learning Inclusion is reduced due to long term illness. Risk assessments have all been completed and staff are continuing to offer services to schools, face to face, and remotely as appropriate.

110 Work is being undertaken to rebalance the system in relation to this work to ensure the provision of high quality, early intervention and prevention that gets the right support to children with special educational needs and their families at the right time and so negating the need for parents and carers to feel that they have to have an EHC Plan in order for their child's needs to be met.

- 111 The number of plans has continued to rise each year and steadied in 2021 to 8.1 per cent on the previous year, equivalent to an additional 350 EHCPs.
- 112 Overall, the current number of EHCPs maintained by Leeds City Council is projected to be in the region of 6,400 to 6,750 by 2026, a circa 8 per cent annual increase based on a three-year trend which includes Covid period when schools were not fully open. It is anticipated that the full impact of Covid has yet to be realised and at the present time there is an upward trend on these figures.
- 113 Leeds performance in issuing new EHCPs within 20 weeks is above all comparator averages from 2013 - 2020. However, at the present time there has been a marked decrease in the proportion issued within 20 weeks statutory deadline from 96.1 per cent in 2019. Internal data from January to October 2021 shows the proportion of new EHCPs issued within 20 weeks currently stands at 87 per cent. This still places Leeds as 26th best out of 151 LAs. There is likely to be a further temporary decrease prior to the end of the year as this indicator has been decreasing since the start of the 2021/22 academic year with pressures resulting from Covid, staffing capacity and increased demand. This picture is being seen across the country at the present time with national average completion times within the 20-week timeframe at 55.6%. However, we are confident that the 100-day plan as described in paragraph 105 addresses these issues and the completion of new requests for EHCPs will return to the extremely high performance levels we have maintained in Leeds.
- 114 Staffing capacity in Learning Inclusion is reduced due to long term illness, Covid and vacant posts not yet recruited to so there are waiting lists for support / intervention. Risk assessments have all been completed and staff are continuing to offer services to schools, face to face, and remotely as appropriate.
- 115 At the time of writing, there are currently 828 electively home educated (EHE) children and young people across the city.
- 116 There have been 160 new notifications to date from September 2021.
- Key stage 3 has the most (65) and key stage 4 (39).
 - There has been less this term in key stage 1/2 (56).
 - Key stage 3 is higher than last year.
- 117 Attendance – Special school provision are reporting high levels of staff absence and difficulty in recruitment of agency staff. Attendance within the specialist schools is around 75-80% which presents a similar picture to Area Inclusion Partnership provision across the city.
- 118 Exclusions
- 119 To date, in this academic year 2021/22, there have been eight permanent exclusions from schools, reported to the local authority. Of these, seven have been secondary level and one at primary. At present, four have been rescinded following discussions with lead officers, Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) Panel and Area Inclusion Partnership (AIP) colleagues and two have been confirmed through the process at the relevant governors meeting. There are two cases that are currently pending governors' decision. This is a higher level than we had seen pre-Covid, when three to four permanent exclusions were the norm. Analysis of the exclusions shows that they are predominantly from one area of the city and focussed work is being undertaken in partnership with the AIP to address this and find alternative solutions to exclusions through the targeted work of the SEMH panel.

- 120 The local authority representative has attended all governors' meetings to date. There have been no independent reviews requested by parents.
- 121 All governors are being offered a free virtual training session on exclusions. Content of the session includes considerations around inclusion, exploring behaviour as presentation of potential unmet need and an outline of support available to schools as well as the legal processes and expectations if fixed term or permanent exclusions are notified by the headteacher. The dates for these sessions are for primary governors on 31st January 2022 and 2nd February 2022, and for secondary governors on 7th February 2022. The sessions will be recorded for future reference.

122 School Admissions

- 123 Throughout the pandemic, schools have continued to consider all requests for in-year admission, responding to applications as quickly as possible and within new statutory timescales of 15 school days, since September 2021. The annual cycle process which allocates places to start in September operated as normal in 2020 and 2021 and is on track to allocate places in the usual way for September 2022, with Year 7 places allocated on 1st March and Reception places allocated on 19th April 2022.
- 124 In April 2020, amendments to the School Admissions Appeal Arrangements Regulations were issued. This removed the requirement for appeals to be heard in person where Covid restrictions prevent this from being reasonably practicable. These regulations have now been extended until September 2022. Leeds City Council introduced 'remote access' appeals via video calls in May 2020, and over 2000 school admission appeals have been heard in this way to date. Since May 2021, appellants have been offered the option of having their appeal heard in person or remotely via a Microsoft Teams call – less than 10 appellants have asked for the appeal to be held in person. Parental attendance at appeal hearings has improved through the virtual access process. While restrictions remain in place which prevent appeal panels from safely meeting in person, remote access appeals will continue to be heard until the regulations change, or in-person hearings are more practical.

What consultation and engagement has taken place?

- 125 Consultation and engagement with a wide range of stakeholders from across the city has been critical to the success of implementing necessary alterations to working practices, the successful transmission and uptake of rapidly changing guidance and ensuring that Children and Families has been able to continue to deliver high quality services in conjunction with its partners. This engagement has included but has not been limited to schools and education settings, children and families, health, police, trade unions, private, third sector and community groups.

What are the resource implications?

- 126 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 on this matter. The Council's Strategy and Resources Scrutiny Board maintains oversight of the financial management strategy in accordance with its remit.

What are the legal implications?

- 127 This report has no specific legal implications.

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

- 128 The risks related to Covid-19 will continue to be monitored through the Council's existing risk management processes.
- 129 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

- 130 Providing the right support at the right time, the local authority supports children, families and learning settings to work towards successful outcomes. 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 enter apprenticeships and into working life will add their wealth of talents in contributing to the city's economic growth.
- 131 There are likely to be environmental impacts associated with the pandemic that will become clearer over time and it is important that the local authority continues to focus on the longer-term impacts of Covid-19 on the climate emergency. Children and Families Services will continue to balance the impact on the environment of work being undertaken and the determination to continue to deliver high quality services.
- 132 Children and Families Services continues to work towards improving the lives of children and families in Leeds and, of course, health and wellbeing sits at the centre of this work. One example of this in children's centres and early year service who have developed a health and wellbeing action plan for their service. The plan outlines the wellbeing offer available to all staff; this is in recognition of the impact that the pandemic has had and continues to have on the mental health and wellbeing of everyone and reflects feedback from the staff surveys.

Appendices

- 133 Appendix 1 - Children and Families Covid-19 Transition Plan 2021-22.

Background papers

- 134 None.