

**REPORT TO: CHILDREN AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

**DATE: 10 JUNE**

**REPORT OF: CABINET MEMBER FOR CHILDREN, FAMILY SERVICES AND EDUCATION**

**REPORT TITLE: RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

## 1.0 Introduction

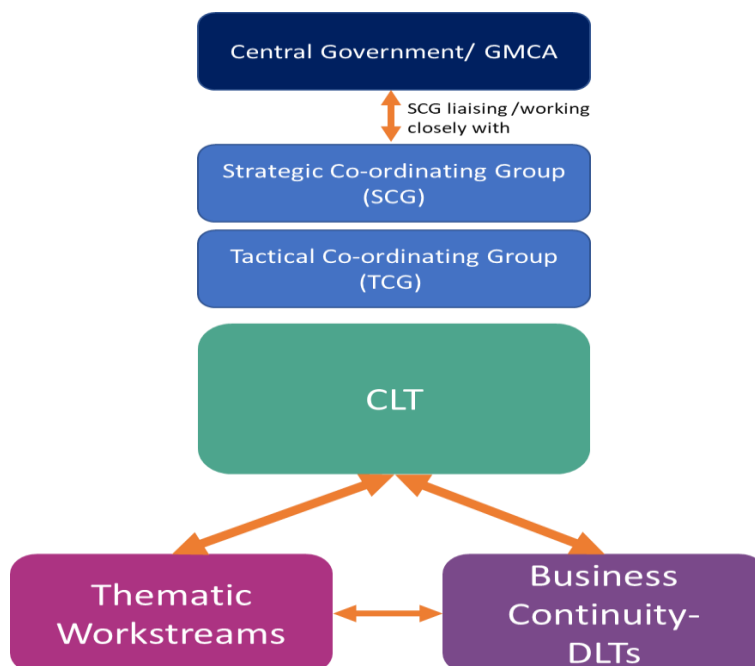
1.1 The spread of Covid-19, declared a global public health emergency, has created unprecedented circumstances within which the Council, working with our communities and partners, have had to respond.

1.2 Whilst an understandably difficult period for many living and working within Stockport, we have also witnessed an incredible and inspiring outpouring of neighbourliness and community spirit.

1.3 This report provides an overview of the Council's response to date, building on regular updates received directly by members and including detail relating to the remit of this committee, and a view of how this response will be developing over the coming weeks and months.

## 2.0 Responding to COVID-19: Council approach

2.1 The Council has established a robust and responsive governance to facilitate cross partnership and organisational response. This has included close working with Government and Greater Manchester:



## 2.2 Responded to Government guidance and advice

The Council's responses have been very much guided by advice and guidance provided by Central Government and the Corporate Leadership Team have reviewed guidance and announcements daily throughout this period. In addition to the emergency coronavirus related legislation which has had a cross cutting impact, the specific relevant published guidance and announcements in terms of the remit of this Committee has included:

### *Children's Social Care*

- Updated Guidance on Vulnerable Children and Young People
- Local Authority and Children's Social Care Guidance
- Adoption Support Fund
- Additional Funding for Support of Vulnerable Children
- Digital Support for Vulnerable and Disadvantaged Young People

### *Schools and Early Years*

- DfE Online Educational Resources
- Updated Guidance on School and College Accountability
- Isolation for Residential Educational Settings Guidance
- EYFS Statutory Framework Amended
- Guidance on Managing School Premises
- Arrangements Announced for Primary National Offer Day
- Ofqual Consultation on GCSE and A level grading proposals
- Remote Education Guidance
- Guidance on School Closures
- Guidance on Re-opening
- Guidance on Implementing Protective Measures in Schools
- Updated Guidance on Apprenticeship Programme

### *SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities*

- SEND Risk Assessment Guidance
- Temporary Changes to EHCP Assessments and Timescales

## 2.3 Provided robust and responsive communications

Clear and responsive communications have been fundamental throughout the Council's response. This has included:

- Boroughwide public communications, sharing public health messages, information about support and celebrating local businesses and organisations;
- Targeted communications for those who are shielding or vulnerable;
- Daily members e-brief
- Daily all colleague e-briefings
- Regular forums (2/3 times a week) with Partners including: Schools, Businesses, VCSE, Food Banks

## 2.4 Redesigned service provision

The organisation has made a number of changes to provision in response to Covid-19, this has included changing the way some services are delivered and in some instances temporarily suspending some services. This has included:

- Closure of public facing buildings (e.g. libraries, registrars)
- Virtual formal meetings;
- Face to face assessments and reviews moved to video/ teleconferencing or
- Temporary suspension of services, schemes and projects (e.g. registrations of births and marriages, Apprenticeships, Bed every Night Project)
- Early years, schools and post-16 setting closures
- Reduction in waste collection, suspension of park maintenance services, closure of public outdoor sport facilities

### 2.5 *Introduced new service provision*

Alongside service changes a series of new services have also been introduced. This has included:

- Business Resilience Hub, including: Stockport Jobs Match service, SK Business Recovery website, New Business Grant scheme and daily update newsletter with advice and information about Covid19 and responses to support businesses
- Stockport Support Hub, including: coronavirus helpline; New services for food, shopping, medicines, driving support, PPE distribution, social contact
- Door step / phone check-ins with those adults and children in receipt of care / additional support (e.g. EHCPs, over 70s with assisted bin collection) and those on national shielded list
- New pathways and revised services via MASSH including: new emotional wellbeing hub which includes daily triage and allocation of appropriate support for children and young people; revised early support offer with daily triage
- Hardship Grant to supplement Council Tax Support (unallocated funds will be used for additional discretionary payments for Council Tax Support, Housing Benefit and support funds)
- New hotel and temporary provision to accommodate rough sleepers
- Coordination of childcare for vulnerable children and children of key workers

## **3.0 Responding to COVID-19: Thematic approach**

3.1 The key programmes of work in the Covid-19 response have been:

- Humanitarian Aid
- Voluntary and Community Response
- Food
- Workforce
- Mortality Management
- Finance
- Out of Hospital Support – Adults and Disability and PPE
- Contact Testing and Tracing
- Children and Education
- Economic Resilience

A summary of scrutiny responsibilities for the Council's Covid-19 response can be found in appendix.1.

3.2 An overview of the activity, progress and impact to date in relation to the programmes and services relevant to this Committee is set out below.

## **Workstream Children and Education**

The Stockport Children's and Education Services Covid-19 Response Group was established to strategically plan the children's services response to Covid-19 in Stockport, ensuring that all services working with children and young people in Stockport are delivering robust business continuity plans during the pandemic, specifically around partial closures of education and care settings (including early years providers, schools, academies, independent schools and colleges).

Close partnership working has been fundamental between key partners in Stockport Family (integrated early help, social care and health, children's service), education services, including early years and schools, and the NHS to ensure that there is clarity and agreement about the collective response to vulnerable children and young people and families, which includes a coordinated response to issues arising as a result of Covid-19. It has been critical to have headteacher representatives who are also the chairs of their representative consortia involved and shaping the Covid-19 response from primary, secondary and special schools.

The group's work has been focused on the following key objectives:

- adequate school and early years provision, including provision for vulnerable children and young people and the children and young people of key workers
- provision for vulnerable children and young people, including children and young people with SEND
- free school meals
- multi-agency safeguarding responsibilities
- access to digital devices and digital poverty

This section provides a high-level summary of Stockport's response in relation to the above areas.

### **Adequate school and early years provision for vulnerable children and young people and the children and young people of key workers**

Following the announcement from central government that educational establishments were to close as from Monday 23rd March, colleagues from the local authority worked with early years, schools, colleges and settings to:

- help providers understand exactly what was being asked of them and to interpret the guidance around the cohorts of children for whom they had a duty to provide care;
- communicate this offer to parents/carers;
- help families who were unable to access places establish childcare for their children.

By Monday 23rd March all but 3 state funded schools and PRU's, most childcare providers and all but one college were open.

A school enquiries email was set up on the 22nd March to support parent/carers of vulnerable children, those with an education, health and care plan (EHP) (where a school placement was judged appropriate) and key worker children, with accessing school places. The inbox has been monitored daily (including weekends) and has received 135 enquiries. Every enquiry about a childcare place had been successfully resolved. The mailbox is still live and receiving enquiries as the next phase of further opening schools is approached.

The numbers of children that arrived into settings was much lower than anticipated as parents/carers began to fully understand the government's message that children were likely to be safer if they were looked after at home if at all possible. The Local Authority

has continued to work with local schools to ensure that those vulnerable children and children of key workers who need to attend continue to do so.

Staff who are in school continue to work hard to provide care for the children attending. In addition, learning packs and online resources have been provided for children at home; and the School Improvement team has shared a range of bespoke resources and links with early years providers, schools and colleges to support and enable effective remote learning for children with SEND who remain at home.

### **Vulnerable children and young people**

A Covid-19 risk assessment has been completed for all children and young people on the vulnerable list and those with an EHCP to assess whether the individual is able to remain safely at home and to identify support requirements. (The 'vulnerable list' is in accordance with DfE guidance and specifies children with a social worker and those with an EHCP. In addition, there is also an 'NHS' vulnerable children's list that is part of the national NHS vulnerable list and contact is being made with those children as well. However, we are not doing a Covid-19 risk assessment with these children unless necessary). Stockport was carrying out these risk assessments prior to the Government's request and all risk assessments have been uploaded onto the case management system, Liquidlogic. Social workers have continued to visit children at home where the risk assessment has identified it is safe to do so. Where a risk assessment has deemed this unsafe due to the risk of Covid-19, alternative and creative ways of contacting children and families have been used such as video conferencing. The local authority is working with settings to support placements where needed.

Whilst government guidance has focused on the most vulnerable and risk assessments have been directed at those with a social worker or an EHCP, in Stockport we wanted to make sure that those who also receive support from an early help perspective were also risk assessed so the appropriate help could be identified. School Age Plus workers have been adapting their role to meet the needs of the children and families allocated to them with most working from home. However, many workers have come into work on occasions where the need to do so has been indicated- for example to collect food bank vouchers and deliver food packages to families. They have been contacting their families regularly by telephone, and face to face (usually a "garden visit" to ensure social distancing,) where there has been the need to see a family. Other examples of work include accessing white goods, bedding, beds and clothing for families in need. Each family on their caseload has had a Covid-19 risk assessment, and each have had a robust plan to ensure children are kept safe and well and where indicated they have been supporting vulnerable children to access their school place.

### **Free school meals**

Schools/early years settings have set up systems for making food available for free school meals (FSM) children who are not attending for a childcare place. Most schools have now moved into the DfE Voucher system. To support families, the local authority has set up a food box scheme and working with schools delivered 2000 boxes across Stockport to our FSM group. Positive feedback relating to the quality of food parcels has been received by Headteachers.

In addition, a community helpline for the most vulnerable has been set up and food parcels continue to be distributed to those on free school meals, young carers and vulnerable list, including those not currently attending school. To date 211 food parcels have been delivered to care leavers.

The local authority, working closely with schools, committed to making sure that all children who receive Free School Meals (with the exception of universal Key Stage 1 school meals) were still able to access this provision over what would have been the Easter holiday period.

### **Digital devices**

The DfE has allocated Stockport Council 740 windows laptops and 73 4G routers (with 6 months of data) for care leavers and children with a social worker and 143 windows laptops and 62 4G routers for schools to distribute to their year 10 students who don't have any means of accessing and completing school work remotely. The 740 devices and routers have arrived and will shortly be distributed via social work teams and via care leaver personal assistants. Internal research indicates there are sufficient laptop devices but we are short on data so we have challenged the DfE on this. The council will only be invited to place the order for schools once they have distributed social care laptops to all authorities. These will go directly to schools who have all been contacted to confirm the allocation that they will receive.

In addition to the national response by the DfE, GMCA are looking at need at a regional level. Through the GM technology fund thirty digital bundles have already been distributed (chromebook and mifi) to three schools in Stockport (Werneth, Reddish Vale and Stockport Academy have each received ten kits) and we are working with them to identify further gaps. Locally, further knowledge is being gained about the picture for Stockport with regards to digital poverty. Lack of data is an emerging theme and the costs surrounding this, therefore, ways to address this are actively being considered.

### **SEND support**

Risk assessments have been carried out for all children on an EHCP, as referenced above. In addition, a SEND Hub has been formed to provide a point of contact for professionals and families during the Covid-19 outbreak. The hub includes local authority educational services, therapy services, children's learning disability, healthy young minds and the nursing team. The hub is aligned to the early help offer through the MASSH and is designed to look at holistic support options for families and young people.

Meanwhile schools continue to work closely with the local authority and are focussing on maintaining contact and relationships, a business as usual attitude including remote annual reviews and transition planning and individualised planning grids.

The council had a virtual visit from the DfE on Thursday 23rd April. Under normal circumstances, this would have been a progress review from our last SEND inspection, but given the current Covid-19 situation, the focus of the meeting was predominantly about the impact of Covid-19 on SEND support for children and young people/processes.

The visit was very positive and the DfE representative identified a number of areas that they were particularly impressed with including:

- The risk assessment approach the council has taken - this has been very thorough and includes not just those children with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) but also early years assessments and SEND.
- The three new emotional wellbeing and mental health services the council and our partners have put in place during this crisis (see below for further information).
- Weekly webinars which are being set up by the parent carer forum working closely with health, LA and children's therapy colleagues addressing ways of how to support families of children and answering their queries.

- Recruitment of a dedicated co-ordinator for the Local Offer.
- The health visitor and school nurse advice line is a strong example of good practice and effective evidence of universal services being available in the normal way (see below for further information).
- The strong commitment to joint agency working.

### Emotional Wellbeing Hub

Stockport's new Emotional Wellbeing Hub has been launched to provide a single point of access to emotional well-being information, support and advice. This had already been identified as a critical programme of work in the Written Statement of Action as a result of the SEND inspection and a significant amount of planning and partnership work had taken place before Covid-19. However, the emotional health and wellbeing needs of children, young people and their families were further emphasised as a result of the pandemic, so this was implemented at pace to respond to these needs. The hub is linked to our revised Early Help Offer (and the SEND hub) and includes three new emotional wellbeing and mental health services the Big White Wall, Kooth and the Covid-19 Crisis line:



The hub is run by educational psychology and the schools wellbeing services, linking into Healthy Young Minds, parenting and school nursing. It is working on materials for schools and settings addressing issues including coping during Covid-19, bereavement support etc, which are also uploaded on to the Stockport SEND Local Offer at the point of completion. The new offer has been publicised through social media and leafletting with food parcels.

A health visitor and school nurse advice line was also set up on 23rd March to provide support around concerns with child development and wellbeing. This has been manned Monday – Friday including bank holidays. Cover has also been provided over a weekend. Over 500 calls have been received through this advice line to date.

Email address: - [cv19@stockport.gov.uk](mailto:cv19@stockport.gov.uk)

A team of Early Years workers from the Start Well and Health Visiting Teams have worked on a rota basis 7 days per week to implement ICON – “Infant Crying and How to Cope”. They have held one to one discussions with new parents on the maternity ward at Stepping Hill which has also been an opportunity to introduce parents to the service available for postnatal support from Start Well Health Visiting teams in the community. In

the initial phase of implementation from 3/5/2020 until 10/5/20 there have been 86 deliveries with 69 parents having a face-to-face discussion and being provided with the ICON leaflet whilst on the maternity unit. This has also increased appropriate enquiries to the health visitor and school nurse advice line as described above.

### **Multi-agency safeguarding responsibilities**

The Covid-19 emergency legislation (Coronavirus Act) provides a number of easements to the Care Act 2014 which local authorities can enact if needed, due to the pressures of responding to Covid-19. The government states:

“The Government has put in place a range of measures to help the care system manage these pressures. Local Authorities should do everything they can to continue meeting their existing duties prior to the Coronavirus Act provisions coming into force. In the event that they are unable to do so, it is essential that they are able to streamline present assessment arrangements and prioritise care so that the most urgent and acute needs are met. The powers in the Act enable them to prioritise more effectively where necessary than would be possible under the Care Act 2014 prior to its amendment (referred to in this guidance as the Care Act). They are time-limited and are there to be used as narrowly as possible.” (from the GOV.uk website)

As per the government guidance on this, our approach across both children's and adults' services will be to only ever enact any of the easements provided for in the Covid-19 legislation or guidance when we have exhausted all other avenues to deliver our statutory obligations as they were before the Covid-19 legislation came into force.

### **Governance and communication**

The Children and Education Services Covid-19 response group, chaired by the Director of Children's Services was originally meeting on a daily basis – initially twice per day. This has now moved to three times per week. The group is accountable to the Corporate Leadership Team and oversees task and finish groups, set up as the need arises to enable operational planning and problem solving to progress outside of meetings such as for free school meals or digital poverty.

Daily newsletter updates to schools/settings are continuing to be developed with Headteacher representatives to ensure the most up to date information and messages are in place. In addition, DfE guidance is circulated to stakeholders on a daily basis to ensure they are kept up-to-date on the government's response to Covid-19.

The SEND Local Offer webpages and specific Covid-19 pages continue to be regularly updated with information and resources (which has been commended across Greater Manchester). The website had over 2000 visits during April. The recent SEND e-newsletter was Covid-19 focussed (<https://content.govdelivery.com/accounts/UKSMBC/bulletins/2844cbd>) and three times weekly virtual check-ins continue with parent and carer representatives to keep representatives up-dated and gain SEND community feedback to inform Stockport's Covid-19 response.

3.3 Given the pace of the Covid-19 response, a verbal update will be provided at the meeting regarding any developments following the publication of this report.

## **4.0 Next Steps**

4.1 We are working hard with colleagues and partners both locally and across Greater Manchester to ensure that we can “build back better” and make Stockport even



stronger in the future. Across Stockport people came together during the crisis and it will be important that we stay together to support recovery.

4.2 With regards to the areas within this committee's responsibility recovery plans will be shared with the committee as they develop. A summary of the next phase of recovery is included below.

<b>Workstream</b>	<b>Children and Education</b>
<p>Since the announcement on 10<sup>th</sup> May from the Prime Minister strongly encouraging parents to send vulnerable children and those in reception, year 1 and year 6 to school from 1 June 2020, there has been a great deal of joint planning taking place between Headteacher representatives and officers across the local authority. Discussions have also taken place at a variety of levels with Greater Manchester colleagues and concerns have been fed back to the DfE and the Regional Schools Commissioner.</p> <p>Locally the following has happened:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• A communication to parents/carers from the local area has been published on Stockport's Local Offer.</li><li>• A risk assessment document has been developed to help senior leaders establish the type of local provision that they will be able to offer safely.</li><li>• Draft letters are also being written for senior leaders to use as they see fit to communicate with both parents and children as the phased return of some children gets closer.</li><li>• The Health and Safety team are working with Estates to make floor plans of schools available to the Headteachers, should they need them to inform their decision making.</li><li>• The Health and Safety team are available to come and do site visits to assist Headteachers with the risk assessment process and Headteachers have been provided with information about how to request this.</li><li>• The Children and Education Services Covid-19 response group continues to meet three times per week to strategically plan the further opening of schools.</li><li>• The Director of Public Health will be writing to all parents in the Stockport community week beginning 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020.</li><li>• Further strategic planning and delivery will take place through the Children and Education Services Covid-19 response group, continuing to work with the close partnership relationships that are so important to response and recovery.</li></ul>	

4.3 A further update on the Council's recovery planning approach will be brought to a future scrutiny committee.

## **5.0 Looking ahead to recovery**

5.1 As described above Council, communities and partners are currently transitioning from the immediate crisis response to a phased easing of lockdown and living with Covid-19. Given this the Council is developing next phase plans across key strands of work identified above, alongside new areas of focus.

5.2 Whilst this has understandably been a difficult time for many of those who live or work in Stockport, as we progress and develop our recovery plans it is more important than ever to ensure that the passion and commitment demonstrated alongside the relationships, trust and mutual respect that have been forged during this unprecedented period from across our communities, businesses, workforce and public services are nurtured.

## **6.0 Recommendations**

6.1 As outlined in section four the Council is now moving its focus to preparing for the next phases of its response, both living with coronavirus and building back better. We are committed to doing this in collaboration with our communities, businesses, elected members, trade unions and partners through existing forums established but also opening conversations and through testing ideas together.

6.2 The Scrutiny Committee are invited to:

- Discuss and note this report and the response to date;
- Note the commitment to return to Scrutiny with information about future phases of response.

### **BACKGROUND PAPERS**

There are none

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Kathryn Rees on telephone number 07989208640 or alternatively email on [kathryn.rees@stockport.gov.uk](mailto:kathryn.rees@stockport.gov.uk)

Appendix.1 – Overview of response and scrutiny responsibility

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Communities and Housing</b>	<b>Corporate Resource Management and Governance</b>	<b>Children and Young People</b>	<b>Economy and Regeneration</b>	<b>Adult Social Care and Health</b>
	<b>Mon 8 June</b>	<b>Tues 9 June</b>	<b>Weds 10 June</b>	<b>Thurs 11 June</b>	<b>Thurs 11 June</b>
<b>Humanitarian Aid</b>	<b>X</b>	<b>X</b>			
<b>Voluntary and Community Response</b>	<b>X</b>				
<b>Food</b>		<b>X</b>			
<b>Workforce</b>		<b>X</b>			
<b>Mortality Management</b>		<b>X</b>			
<b>Finance</b>		<b>X</b>			
<b>Out of Hospital Support – Adults and Disability and PPE</b>					<b>X</b>
<b>Contact Testing and Tracing</b>					<b>X</b>
<b>Children and Education</b>			<b>X</b>		
<b>Economic Resilience</b>				<b>X</b>	