

REPORT TO: CHILDREN AND FAMILIES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 14 APRIL 2021

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

REPORT TITLE: RESPONDING TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC – UPDATE

1. Introduction and Purpose of the Report

1.1 The pandemic has undoubtedly had an impact on children and their families in Stockport and nationally, whether that be as a result of isolation from friends, learning from home, or worry that family and friends may become unwell. Whilst the majority of children have shown great resilience throughout this period, some require additional support to enable them to thrive.

1.2 A full report on the Council's response to the pandemic was brought to Children and Families Scrutiny Committee in June 2020. This report is a further update on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and families and the support available in Stockport, with particular reference to: -

- Early years;
- Support for children with SEND and SEND transport
- Primary, secondary, alternative provision and special schools;
- Free school meals;
- Social Care
- Digital support

1.3 This report provides an update covering the period January – March 2021

2. Background

2.1 There has been a partnership wide, co-ordinated response to supporting vulnerable people across Stockport during the coronavirus pandemic. This has included strong partnership across the public sector, the private sector and with the voluntary and community sector in the Borough. This One Stockport approach has brought a synergistic approach to responding to people's needs during the periods of lockdown as well as supporting a response to building back post the pandemic.

2.2 Governance and good communication have been key to the success of this partnership work. Further information on the governance of this work for Children's Services can be found in Appendix 1.

- 2.3 At the point of lockdown in March 2020, Stockport quickly moved to professionals primarily working from home and put in place measures to support the workforce to do so, focusing on their emotional well-being and having access to the necessary tools and online resources to do this, alongside with Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Focusing on our most vulnerable children has been a priority to meet their emotional and physical health, education and financial and practical support needs. In doing this the importance of maintain face-to-face visiting which is socially distanced and safe has been critical as whilst there have been benefits to the use of online means of staying in contact with families the importance of being with children and families and maintain direct relationships cannot be underestimated.
- 2.4 Stockport's data on the proportion of face-to-face vs virtual visiting has been very positive and shows that from an initial position of around 55% of all visiting being done face-to-face in May 2020 this had increased to at least 77% in August and approximately 90% in September. Face-to-face visiting has continued to be prioritised and remains 90 % of all visits to children and families with a small amount done virtually. This reflects Stockport's belief that use of virtual or online methods of working with children and families should only be used when it is vital to do so.
- 2.5 The information below provides an overview of the approach taken through the pandemic specifically to support children and families, with a focus on activity over the most recent lockdown, January to March 2021.

Early Years

- 2.6 Early years settings have remained open to all children from the beginning of January (this includes school based pre-reception provision as per the Government guidance).
- 2.7 Local childcare/early education sufficiency is strong with only two permanent closures of group settings in the last 12 months. Within early years settings (including childminders, pre-schools, day nurseries and out of school settings) we have had a further 37 positive cases of Covid-19 to the end of February. 263 of the 293 childminders in Stockport are currently open this number is expected to increase as demand for wrap around care increases.
- 2.8 Out of school and holiday clubs will be reopening and will be linked to the Holiday Activity and Food (HAF) programme (see 2.21 below) where appropriate to support their future sustainability.
- 2.9 The most recent attendance data shows that local levels of attendance were above the national figures. (54% in Stockport compared to the national average of 41%). This is currently rising with the return of all children to school and younger siblings returning to their early years setting also. Some settings

already at 75%. The take-up of the 2 year old entitlement Stockport is current ranked first in the north west local authorities and fifth out of 152 local authorities nationally.

- 2.10 The sector has given positive feedback on the support provided by the Council's Early Years teams; in particular the additional supplies of PPE, the monthly check-in opportunity with Public Health and the weekly council COVID up-date for early years, schools and colleges. A significant success, not seen in other parts of the country, is the setting up of large nurseries as registered testing sites; and again we have received significant praise for the support for the sector from the public health team in relation to this. Extending the opening times of Fred Perry House one night per week during March to facilitate access to asymptomatic testing is also planned following feedback from local childminders.
- 2.11 Start Well health visiting and early years teams have continued to provide the universal offer of mandated assessments for preschool children and families; both face to face and in virtual sessions. There has also been a risk stratification of need and enhanced offer to families based on these assessments.
- 2.12 The Team Around the Early Years (TAEY) is an early intervention approach underpinned by restorative approaches which aims to support children and families with emerging needs. The approach enables early years providers to access early help and support for their children and families. Embedding and enhancing TAEY is a priority within the Start Well strategy.
- 2.13 During the pandemic there have been more frequent TAEY meetings and discussions with early years providers bringing an increased focus on practical support for families and support to address holiday hunger.
- 2.14 Start Well Coordinators have supported early years providers with vulnerability risk assessments which have demonstrated increasing numbers of children with SEND.
- 2.15 Start Well teams have supported take up of the two year offer throughout the pandemic by making contact with all eligible families termly. This contact has identified need, supported preparation for preschool and transition.
 - There is an increased focus on risk, vulnerability and SEND as part of recovery planning.
 - Training and access to liquid logic for completion of EHA/TAF processes has now been offered to all higher need settings. 15 settings now have access with 27 staff in total having been trained. Further training and engagement of more settings is planned.

- Workforce development planning continues to demonstrate our commitment to developing Solihull and Restorative Approaches as best practice model underpinning TAEY.

Support for children with SEND and SEND transport

- 2.16 During the recent lockdown statutory guidance was that all children with an EHCP should have access to a school place, although attendance processes were not in force. The school enquiry line continued to provide advice to any parent/carers who needed support accessing a school place during this time.
- 2.17 The SEND service alongside school improvement contacted every school within the borough to gain a picture on whether places had been offered to the SEND and vulnerable cohorts. The majority of schools had offered all places with 49.2 % of children with EHCP attending school in Stockport, this was the highest number in the north west.
- 2.18 The educational psychology service has held further webinars for parent/carers and released further resources for children and parents / carers to support the transition back into schools.
- 2.19 The early help offer which was extended during the first lockdown has continued. Please see further details in 2.27 below.
- 2.20 The planning for re-tender of the SEND transport contract has now begun and a timetable is currently being drawn up by the team. Training is being developed for the taxi companies and escorts. This is centred on health needs and safeguarding with an event planned in the summer term to 'kick start' it.

Primary, secondary, alternative provision and special schools

- 2.21 During the third lockdown, Covid cases reduced from the high levels seen during the Autumn Term. Overall maintained schools reported 163 cases to the Schools Contact tracing line. Bubble closures took place on 93 occasions and led to 228 staff and 1289 children being asked to self-isolate between the start of term and March 12 2021. 2 schools had to close completely for a short period of time with outbreak control meetings held with 6 schools.
- 2.22 All high schools and colleges have engaged with the asymptomatic testing of students and staff. This was a huge logistical undertaking. These tests will increasingly now be completed at home. Staff in primary schools are now testing at home twice a week.
- 2.23 High schools are encouraging their staff and students to wear face coverings throughout the day. For the most part this is going well. School leaders are working hard to ensure the public health message contained within

government guidance is adhered to, whilst also ensuring that children receive an education if they choose not to wear a face covering.

- 2.24 Children, young people and staff alike had responded well to the re-opening of schools. Schools are working hard to adapt their curriculum to the needs of their students as they return and are currently assessing the impact of lockdown upon the children's learning. They are also working hard to ensure that the preventative measures continue to be a central feature of daily life in school, whilst also delivering full face-to-face curriculum.
- 2.25 Team around the School has continued to run virtually through the pandemic, with core team of early help school age plus workers, school nursing and social workers in regular contact with Stockport primary and secondary school staff, to ensure children and families in need of early help can receive timely support. The school age plus workers have also:
- Worked to contribute to early help triage to cases being referred into the MASSH.
 - Provided vulnerability assessments to identify child and family need during Covid and have provided practical support child poverty and holiday hunger initiatives.
 - Recovery planning has had a focus on emotional wellbeing of all children including refresher training on Solihull and restorative approaches.

Support for Children Eligible for Benefits Related Free School Meals (FSM)

- 2.26 Since the start of the pandemic we have seen an increase month on month of families who have become eligible for FSM. We have also seen an increase in families who are struggling, but don't meet the criteria for FSM and are currently working to support these families.
- 2.27 Over the Christmas holidays the Council made 7500 voucher payments via PayPoint to families eligible for free school meals, this was repeated over the February half term, as part of the COVID Winter Support package. The value of the vouchers were £20 per eligible child. The additional £5 per eligible child was to reflect the current national lockdown, and the increased costs such as household fuel and heating as a result. This has included families with preschool children in receipt of a 2 year old place or eligible for early years pupil premium.
- 2.28 To support families over Easter, the Council will once again be issuing vouchers to the value of £50 per eligible child to help with the costs of food, utilities and other winter essentials. The increased amount is to ensure that families are supported during the Easter and May Half-Term holiday period.

2.29 Moving forward, support during the holidays will be through the Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) Programme which will offer a range of activities, with food from Summer 2021. Some holiday activities will be available during Easter half term, as part of the initial roll out of the programme during the existing Covid restrictions.

Multi Agency Safeguarding and Support Hub (MASSH)

2.30 The MASSH continues with a business as usual approach. The majority of MASSH partners have been working from home but with a continued presence of our Police colleagues and an agreed rota of Stockport Family and business support colleagues it has enabled continuity of support throughout the pandemic.

2.31 We have seen a significant increase in the number of contacts being made to the MASSH in Q3 2020/21, with 1027 more than Q3 2020. 47% of contacts receive result in Early help or a referral to social care. This data provide reassurance that COVID-19 and associated lockdown restrictions have not led to barriers in need being identified and acted upon by our partner agencies. However, it does indicate an increasing level of need in our community.

2.32 The top 5 presenting reasons for the contacting the MASSH are Domestic Abuse (274), Parenting Capacity (239), Child with Emotional/Behavioural Difficulties (203) and Child Abuse/Neglect (157) and Offending (135). Acute Mental Health Episode (Parent/Carer).

2.33 In respect of the presenting issues that result in children and families receiving early help support the top 5 reasons for presentations are Child with Emotional/Behavioural Difficulties (611), Domestic Abuse (463), Parenting Capacity (426), Child Abuse/Neglect (292), and Offending (258). In addition we are seeing increasing level of need in relation to adult mental health and substance misuse with notifications being at higher levels than what was seen throughout 2019/20.

2.34 Children reported missing from home in Q3 2020/21 (462) is lower than that of previous comparable years and quarters. The reduction directly correlates with the pandemic. There is currently a thematic review taking place, this will include impact and learning from the delivery of children services response to children who go missing from home. The findings of this report will be available in April 21.

2.35 From Tuesday 6th April 2021 referrals to access routine or non-urgent mental health, emotional wellbeing and neurodevelopmental support for children and young people will be made by notifying the MASSH. This is significant and important change. It will replace the current way of referring to Healthy Young Minds (HYMs). Direct referrals to HYMs for non-urgent support will be sent to

the MASSH. In order to achieve this new and exciting development Stockport Family have further collaborated with Pennine Care and now have Pennine Care mental health practitioners co-located in the MASSH to respond to referral.

Social Care

- 2.36 To ensure Stockport meets its responsibilities as set out by the Department for Education for the delivery of children's services we developed a Covid-19 risk assessment early in the onset of the pandemic and provided guidance to the work force through several emergency operating procedures covering:
- Face-to-face and home visits
 - Child protection conferences, Looked after children and Pathway plan reviews
 - Virtual and direct family time
 - Services visiting schools and settings
 - Covid-19 risk assessment
 - Covid-19 vulnerability assessment
- 2.37 We are continuing to deliver in situations of escalating need in Children's Services due to changing demand; no additional capacity but with the creativity and flexibility to deliver. Whilst the number of statutory referrals has only slightly increased, the complexity of the referrals is greater resulting in an increase in looked after children.
- 2.38 A detailed analysis of the numbers of children entering Stockport's care during the pandemic was undertaken in July 2020 to understand better the reasons for children becoming looked after, their journey whilst in the care of the council, and any actions that needed to be taken to reduce this rise in numbers. This report has been shared in a number of key meetings for oversight and scrutiny – including the Inspecting Local Authority Children's Services board, and Corporate Safeguarding Accountabilities meeting.
- 2.39 A review of the original report completed in November 2020 showed that the rate of children coming into care has stabilised. The overall numbers of children in Stockport's care peaked in November 2020 and since then have continued to gradually decline.
- 31st March = 378 looked after children
 - 13th December = 425 looked after children
 - 29th March = 413 looked after children.
- 2.40 A further review of the cohort is currently taking place and will be completed by April 2021 to inform our delivery of services and to support our work to reduce the numbers of children needing to be in the care of the council.

- 2.41 During lockdown 1 and 2 Stockport focused efforts on ensuring all children open to a lead practitioner, social worker or with an EHCP, or who were a young carer, or care leaver had a COVID-19 risk assessment completed. Over 6,000 of the risk assessments were completed and this provided assurance that the specific vulnerabilities of each vulnerable child or young person were identified so that they could be supported.
- 2.42 In Jan 2021 during lockdown 3 Stockport's Covid-19 vulnerability assessment process was introduced which identified those children and young people who were assessed as vulnerable and in need of specific support to enable them to attend school and education settings. In partnership with early years, schools and education settings efforts were made to ensure that everything possible was done to reduce social isolation, and support children and young people to access all the benefits of accessing school and settings.
- 2.43 The opening of schools and settings to all children on 8th March has seen an increase in both contacts to the MASSH and referrals to children's social care in line with similar patterns at the end of lockdown 1 and 2.
- 2.44 Careful scrutiny of data relating to front door, child protection and looked after children figures have continued throughout the pandemic and this allows us to carry out specific auditing and quality assurance activity when trends emerge and to take swift action to address any issues identified about practice or delivery of services.
- 2.45 Practice weeks where leaders observe and review practice with children and families have continued, with our third practice week since the start of the pandemic taking place at the beginning of March. The focus was on domestic abuse, and working with adolescent risk as these two areas have shown increased complexity and demand during the pandemic. The initial feedback from the week showed evidence of some excellent practice being delivered with children and young people. We are planning the next practice week for the whole of Stockport Family for June. Practice weeks mean that we have a clear line of sight into practice with families and the quality of work being delivered so that any key actions or areas for improvement can be addressed swiftly.

Digital Support

- 2.46 During the first six months of the pandemic over 1000 devices such as tablets, laptops, phones were distributed to vulnerable children, care leavers and care homes. More recently the council, through the Digital Inclusion Alliance and GMCA has been increasing the ways in which schools can secure more devices for their pupils who are finding lack of devices and data to be a barrier to education

2.47 GMCA's GM Technology Fund again offers new kit as well as pre-loved devices directly to schools. In addition, Stockport's Digital Inclusion Alliance, DigiKnow has a device recycling scheme with donations from local businesses; low cost, pre-loved devices can be purchased from the Stockport Charity Community Computers 0161 476 2777. Alternatively, the Digital Lending Library can be contacted via this helpline number - 07537 127095 to have a discussion about what their school needs, or they can signpost families to contact the library directly. The Digital Lending Library can also help if a family requires support with digital skills and online safety.

3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 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

1. Responding to the Covid 19 Pandemic – June 2020 which can be viewed [here](#)

Anyone wishing to inspect the above background papers or requiring further information should contact Carolyn Anderson at Carolyn.anderson@stockport.gov.uk