

**CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY**  
**COMMITTEE**

**1<sup>ST</sup> SEPTEMBER 2020**

**COVID-19 RECOVERY UPDATE**

**JOINT REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY**  
**SERVICES AND DIRECTOR OF CORPORATE RESOURCES**

**Purpose of the Report**

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with a detailed update on progress made within the Children and Family Services Department in implementing its interim recovery in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and to set out initial proposals for longer term recovery planning and strategic change in accordance with the Council's Recovery Strategy.

**Policy Framework and Previous Decisions**

2. Leicestershire County Council's (LCC) Covid-19 Recovery Strategy (2020-21) sets out the key principles, governance structures and phases upon which recovery of the Council's functions and services will be based. This will help ensure a joined-up, consistent and well-informed approach throughout the recovery process, with key principles and approaches reflected, which will culminate in a transition to Departmental Service and Business Planning, utilising supplementary mechanisms to complement pre-existing governance and decision-making protocols of the Council.
3. Interim Recovery is described in LCC's Recovery Strategy as;
  - The need to ensure safe service recovery in the short-term - protecting the vulnerable and helping to ensure the Council delivers against its commitments - will require Heads of Service to develop and implement practical interim arrangements for service users, partners, suppliers and staff. Such arrangements will be necessary and applicable to the short-term but may not be appropriate or sustainable for the longer term. Corporate guidance for this short-term planning will be provided, also helping to ensure the longer-term position for the Council is considered.
4. The guidance for Interim Recovery planning aims to support LCC's functions and services in recovering to a suitable interim position, for a period of up to approximately three months, or until full recovery plans are agreed and can start to be actioned.

5. Heads of Service have ensured the production of interim recovery plans, in collaboration with corporate subject matter experts, Business Partners, DMTs and Departmental Business Planning leads.
6. Decisions were made at the beginning of Covid-19 lockdown that all the services within Children and Families are critical and that the majority of functions needed to maintain a safe service delivery. During the crisis the department has reviewed services daily to determine how they should be delivered and to monitor staffing levels to ensure services for the most vulnerable children and families are maintained.
7. The majority of staff work from home or remotely, with some working from County Hall, locality offices or at Oakfield Short Stay School whilst maintaining a good level of contact with the most vulnerable children with appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to ensure safety and wellbeing.

### **Recovery Plans**

8. The focus of the department recovery plans is:
  - **Finance** - to minimise the cost of recovery, manage spend approval limits and where possible mitigate additional costs within service budgets. The department continues to look for more efficient service options and delivery approaches to reduce costs and manage income levels as well as continuing to monitor existing Service Level Agreements (SLAs)/Contracts and placements on a regular basis.
  - **Workplace** –staff within the department continue to work from home where possible, with front-line services running from County Hall and localities and face to face visits with service users taking place in line with Workplace Health and Safety Guidance. The application of social distancing measures for staff, visitors and service users is paramount and appropriate PPE has been provided to all staff who require it.
  - **Wellbeing** – Children and Family Services continuously monitor the impact of the current climate on staff well-being and is fully understood. The department is also looking at productivity, motivation, culture and is accessing the required support to mitigate risks and enhance potential benefits. The need for changes to working patterns and hours to accommodate staff and mitigate wellbeing pressures has been considered.
  - **Digital** – As a priority, staff have been supported and have been provided with the necessary tools to fulfil their roles and the department continues to review and analyse future service demands. Staff have developed and embraced new ways of working and have engaged positively with the change. They continue to put forward ideas/suggestions for ongoing digital improvements not only for the department but corporately.

- **Environment** - The Heads of Service continue to assess low carbon options for service delivery and future savings and to avoid additional carbon commitments, they focus on minimising the impact on the environment and enhance the environment where possible.
- **Commissioning and Procurement** – the department continues to ensure up to date information on the service supply chain is viable and resilient, and source alternative providers/suppliers. Consideration is given to the appropriateness of any immediate contract renewals at DMT level.
- **Communication** – The department continues to develop excellent forms of communication with service users, parents and carers, schools, partners and providers for service recovery and ensure it is understood and actioned. Internal communication continues to be critical and the department has engaged with staff through surveys that have included other LCC services.
- **Other service areas during recovery** – The department has worked hard to ensure any immediate requirements for PPE have been met and are clear and conform with existing guidance. It has reviewed immediate and future staffing demands and assessed capacity, including the need for recruitment and/or redeployment to cover vacancies or capacity issues. It continues to manage immediate service demand, including service backlog or step down of need during the crisis.

### **Service Delivery During the Pandemic and Service Recovery**

9. During Covid-19 most services within Children and Families continued to operate and deliver work with families and communities albeit in a different format.

### **Targeted Early Help and Children's Social Care**

10. At the beginning of the lockdown period, revised guidance was developed across Targeted Early Help and Children's Social Care to support staff in prioritising and adapting how services were delivered to respond to the Covid-19 outbreak. The guidance included a risk assessment for each child which informed the risk management plan including the frequency and type of visiting that is in place during the Covid-19 emergency.
11. The front door to Targeted Early Help and Children's Social Care has continued to operate, ensuring safeguarding concerns have been dealt with in a timely manner. Additional capacity has been put into the Service in order to ensure incoming referrals are dealt with in a timely manner to meet children's needs.
12. Services to the most vulnerable children are continuing, social workers and children and family wellbeing workers are working directly with children either in their homes, where needed, or via electronic methods (Skype and WhatsApp video calling). Work is now being undertaken across Targeted Early Help and Children's Social Care to increase face to face visits with children and families, in line with government guidance.

13. Virtual group work programmes have been delivered and will continue to be delivered to young people and also to parents and carers as part of parenting support programmes.
14. Foster Carer recruitment has continued over the last four months, albeit in a virtual capacity through online events rather than at County Hall.
15. Adoption Panels are being successfully completed virtually. Consideration is being given to the use of Zoom/Microsoft Teams to ensure that applicants are able to participate in information evenings and Prospective Adopter training. Assessment visits to potential adopters are being completed virtually.
16. At the beginning of the lockdown period the Children and Family Wellbeing Centres were all closed and paused the delivery of face to face work within the centres. Work has now been undertaken to re-open the three contact centres at the end of July as phase 1 of the re-opening of all 18 children's centre buildings to the public. Work is taking place to develop plans to look at how the remaining centres can be re-opened safely and in line with guidance.
17. The IMPACT Service was paused at the beginning of the pandemic. At the beginning of July, the service re-started street-based work directly with young people in areas of concern as well as developing an online programme to work with young people across Leicestershire.

### **Education and SEND**

18. Early Years and Childcare advisers have remained in contact with providers who have remained open or are now re-opening to offer support and guidance. Training for the Early Years sector is being delivered online and work has taken place across the last few months to ensure further training can now be offered online rather than through face to face training groups. The Early Years Area Special Educational Needs advice has been delivered remotely, rather than in settings, to ensure Early Years Children with Special Educational Needs remain supported. Early Years Advisors have also been offering support and advice on activities that can be done to support children at home.
19. Whilst many Early Years settings have remained open, particularly for vulnerable children and those children of key workers, the Early Years' Service is now working with childcare providers across Leicestershire to support the full re-opening of Early Years settings in the Autumn Term.
20. The Education Quality and Improvement Team has worked with schools throughout the pandemic to provide advice, guidance and support around the continued provision of education throughout lockdown and in opening schools back up to groups of children prior to the summer holidays. Virtual training has also taken place for school staff and governors.

21. The department is monitoring guidance from the Department for Education (DfE) on the proposals for schools re-opening in the autumn and continuing to provide support and guidance to all schools, FE colleges and Early Years settings. A Back to School 2020 campaign was launched in August with a range of information to support parents, carers and children with their return to school in the Autumn Term. In addition to this a 'Getting Ready for School 2020' space has been developed as a resource for parents to support them and their children in preparing for the start of the Autumn Term.

<https://www.leicestershire.gov.uk/education-and-children/schools-colleges-and-academies/coronavirus-school-information/getting-ready-for-school-2020>

22. The Admissions Service has continued to process school applications and school appeals are now being heard remotely. In line with DfE guidance, the service will resume non-attendance processes and the issue of penalty notices where appropriate at the start of September.

23. The School Organisation Service has continued to make good progress with the development of additional school places, in particular for those pupils with SEND (forming part of the High Needs Block development plan). Effective planning with contractors and delivery partners has ensured that slippage to the programme and additional costs arising from lockdown/social distancing restrictions have been kept to an absolute minimum.

24. Remote contacts and risk assessed home visits with PPE have been undertaken to children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

25. Schools across the County undertook risk assessments for all children deemed to be more vulnerable during the pandemic, particularly focussing on supporting attendance at school. Alongside this, remote learning packages were made available by schools for those not going into school over the summer term.

26. During the pandemic there has been a reduction in the provision of overnight short breaks and a suspension of overnight short breaks for foster carers. Group activities for disabled children over the summer holiday period have also been altered in line with national guidance. However, alternative provision, sometimes with the use of direct payments to families, was offered to families across the county.

27. Services across education and SEND are now working on aiming to return to some face to face work in schools and family homes from September, based on risk assessments.

28. The SEN Assessment Service continued to operate at close to full capacity during the pandemic and performance regarding EHCP Needs Assessment remained high with the large majority of assessments undertaken within the 20-week timescales. Some relaxations to the legislation were provided by the Secretary of State in relation to these timescales, taking into account the restrictions on face to face contact for professionals to undertake certain assessments, for example Educational Psychology. However, assessment

work has been undertaken remotely and the service has been able to operate without using these relaxations. 134

29. Similarly, there were relaxations relating to provision named in existing Education Health Care Plans as many children were unable to attend school. This meant that all 'reasonable endeavours' had to be made between the Local Authority and providers to ensure provision named in EHCPs was delivered to children with SEND. The Local Authority worked closely with providers and parents to ascertain where this was not possible and to make alternative arrangements to ensure that reasonable provision was delivered.
30. At the beginning of the pandemic, all schools, FE colleges and settings undertook risk assessments at child and school level to determine which children would be safer at school or at home. These risk assessments were provided to the Local Authority where they were reviewed, and individual discussions took place to ensure the majority of children's needs were met at an appropriate level during the period.
31. Annual Reviews of EHCPs continued remotely, where possible, and any changes to EHCPs were completed or are in the process of being concluded.
32. Decision-making panels for EHCP assessments and issuing of plans have continued virtually and parents and carers have continued to be advised of the outcomes of these panels.
33. Staff within the Specialist Teaching Service have continued to provide advice and support to children and schools during the pandemic. The majority of work has been undertaken remotely. For example, advice has been given about the use of technology to support remote learning for children who have a visual or hearing impairment. Traded work with schools has largely continued, for example, through on-line training. Specialist Teachers have been able to advise schools and work with parents/carers and young people around 'reasonable endeavours' to enable schools to meet the identified needs of children in a creative way.
34. The Educational Psychology Service (EPS) has continued to undertake statutory work during the pandemic period. Individual child assessments as part of the EHCP Needs Assessment process have been undertaken using a variety of means. Where necessary these assessments have been qualified with an acknowledgment that there has not been an opportunity for direct face to face work with a child. The EPS has also worked closely with partners to produce a range of helpful information, for example, around mental health issues during Covid 19 and tips about coping with stress and anxiety.
35. All SEND Services (SENA, STS, EPS and Disabled Children's Service) have plans in place for some face to face work to commence during the autumn term, in negotiation with providers and parents and carers, in line with Government guidance and risk assessments. This will include attendance at key Annual Reviews, discussions with settings about meeting particular children's needs and specialist assessment work.

### **Lessons Learnt**

36. Key lessons learnt for the Department are as follows:

The use of technology to enable remote working: making appropriate equipment and technology available to all staff quickly has resulted in the department's ability to maintain service delivery across the majority of functions. This means that the department is prepared for further business continuity issues that would require remote working. It has also provided opportunities to explore alternative ways of meeting with staff both across the organisation and with partners in order to strengthen joint work.

Working virtually with families: through the use of technology and the use of Apps to see children and their families, many services have been able to work successfully with children and families virtually. This has included face to face work with families and children, meetings, group work and adoption panels

This method of working has on the whole been well received and embraced by children and families and has meant that meetings can be more flexible to meet the demands of families, including consideration around safety. The department is now considering ways in which elements of this practice is implemented as business as usual where appropriate and safe.

Improved engagement with young people, parents and carers: in some circumstances the engagement with young people, in particular those with SEND, has improved as they are often more comfortable engaging in a virtual arena rather than in a room which can often cause anxiety. This has been particularly noticeable in the development of the Written Statement of Action, following the Ofsted/QCQ local area inspection of SEND. Many young people have been engaged in the co-production of the plan using various virtual platforms.

Reduced costs: as well as the reduction in costs associated to travel and expenses, there have been marked reductions in stationery, post and printing experiences and staff have moved to almost paperless modes of working and are using the tools available to them more routinely, such as secure email.

## **Resource Implications**

37. The cost of Covid-19 for the Children and Families Service may only be fully understood later in the year or into the next financial year. Nationally, it has been recognised that it is highly likely that there will be pressure on children's services when schools return and the impact of the pandemic on children and families is fully understood. Therefore, there are a number of key risk areas that the department will monitor over the coming months

- Any potential rises in the costs of placement for children in care both in terms of increased numbers of children in care alongside increased unit costs due to placement demand and market pressures.
- Any increases in the number of contacts and referrals into Children's Social Care during recovery that could lead to more children requiring support from services that could result in increased costs of family support services.
- Any increased demand on the SENA service relating to requests for assessments for Education Health Care plans when schools and settings fully open in the Autumn term.

## **Background Papers**

**Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure**

38. This report has been e-mailed to all members of the County Council

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**List of Appendices**

39. None

**Equalities and Human Rights Implications**

40. None