



**CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY**  
**COMMITTEE: 1 JUNE 2021**

**WIDER IMPACT OF COVID 19**

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY**  
**SERVICES**

**Purpose of report**

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the wider impact of Covid-19 on children and young people in Leicestershire.

**Background**

2. The Coronavirus pandemic has posed unprecedented pressures and challenges across society both nationally and locally and it is known that this specifically presents a higher level of risk for some children. Children and Family Services have recognised it is especially important that children and young people across Leicestershire continue to receive the services and support that they need and are effectively safeguarded during this pandemic. The service has adapted and changed the way it has delivered services to reflect changing circumstances, guidance and restrictions and has dealt with the additional pressures presented by local lockdowns affecting Leicester and some areas of Leicestershire since July 2020.

**Consultation**

3. A recent report from the Association for Young People's Health (AYPH) suggests that children and young people have been less affected than other age groups by the Coronavirus infection itself, but have been disproportionately impacted by the social, educational and economic impacts of the pandemic. They identify there is evidence that many of the known risk factors for poorer outcomes for children and young people have been increased by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, including, for example, financial hardship and academic pressures. In particular, young people already facing challenges in their lives (such as those living in poverty, living with a disability or in challenging family situations) seem likely to have been hardest hit. The report highlights particular concern about the possible 'slow burn' impacts of educational and employment constraints, and the role the pandemic is playing in widening health inequalities.

4. During May 2020, Barnardo's commissioned a number of surveys with children and young people (age 8-25) to understand how Coronavirus and the lockdown was affecting them personally. At least a third of the children and young people surveyed said they had experienced an increase of mental health and wellbeing issues including stress, loneliness and worry and nearly three-quarters said they missed going into school or college which is an important factor in supporting children's mental health and wellbeing. The findings highlight the increase in mental health issues among children and young people as a result of lockdown. The findings suggest Covid-19 and the measures to contain it have had a disproportionate impact on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing, especially those most vulnerable and marginalised in society.
5. The Leicestershire County Council Policy Team, with the support of a cross-council working group, has recently undertaken the [Conversations about Covid](#) project aimed at understanding the full impact of the pandemic on local people. The project has spoken with the Children and Family Service Children in Care Council and a youth volunteering group associated with Voluntary Action Leicestershire, as well as parent-carers of young people with autism. These conversations revealed a wide range of different experiences across the county. Amongst young people in care, there was a recognition of how much more "chilled" life was during the pandemic and how the pandemic had created time for activities outside of school. However, there was a widespread desire for the structure and social element of face-to-face teaching and hobbies, as well as a recognition of the "toxic" influence of social media which has adversely affected many of their friendships. Support networks also came up in the conversation with youth volunteers, where there was a large variety of support received across the group, and the group observed that the pandemic had worsened some individuals' mental health and improved that of others. Many members of the group found themselves with more spare time and used this to start learning something new. The parent-carers spoken to reported regression amongst many of their young people in terms of their mental and physical health. This was attributed to the lack of socialising, exercise and the suspension of physical therapy support. Parent-carers also referenced a decline in the young people's education levels as many had been unable to receive online SEND teaching because of their access needs. Daily walks outside were reported by most as the primary source of calm and respite for both children and parent-carers.
6. The Children and Families Service actively seeks feedback from children, young people and families across Leicestershire on an on-going basis as part of direct work undertaken with families, through specific engagement activity and through forums including the Children's Youth Council for Leicestershire (CYCLe), Children in Care Council and the SEND Parent Carer Forum. With the permission of Barnardo's, their national consultation on the impact of Covid-19 was adapted and used in June 2020 by Leicester City and Leicestershire and Rutland's Safeguarding Children Partnerships to enable Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland to obtain timely localised data. A total of 147 young people from across Leicestershire completed the online survey and the following key themes were identified:

- The majority of young people evidently disliked the impact of lockdown upon their day-to-day lives and requirement to stay indoors at home
  - Young people confirmed they had missed going to school / college and that completing academic study had become more difficult. Additional anxiety was also reported, regarding young people knowing how much study to complete.
  - Inter-linked with not attending school / college, was young people reporting increased difficulty regarding talking with friends and not being able to maintain peer relationships
  - Baseline data also confirmed young people had experienced difficulty in finding things to do and positively occupy their time
  - Young people clearly stated that Covid-19 and the impact of lockdown had resulted in the majority experiencing increased anxiety, worry and feelings of sadness. A significant number also reported increased difficulty sleeping
  - Young people identified feeling lonely, with some also reporting increased stress and instances of anger
  - Young people identified friends and family as their greatest source of support during the period of lockdown.
7. As a result of the survey the Partnerships have continued to highlight young people's mental health as a key part of their business plan and commissioned an audit of CAMHS waiting lists.

### **Impacts of Covid-19 on Children and Young People in Leicestershire**

#### **Early Years**

8. On 23 March 2020, childcare providers were asked to close as part of the first national lockdown and only remain open for children of key workers and vulnerable children. In September 2020, most providers reopened and from 4 January 2021, when the third national lockdown restrictions were announced, early years provision was required to remain open to allow all children to attend. The Early Years Inclusion and Childcare Service undertook surveys with early years providers in November 2020 and February 2021 to help understand the local impact of Covid-19 and the associated national lockdowns on children's learning and development and the take up of the free early education entitlement (FEEE).
9. Headcount data shows there has been an impact on the take up of the universal 3 and 4 year FEEE and targeted 2 year FEEE as a result of the pandemic. For example, during the Autumn term of 2020, parental confidence to send their child to an early years provision was beginning to rise, reflected in December 2020 take up figures showing 10,006 children attending early years provision. However, since 5 January 2021 and the new national lockdown, this number has dropped by 20% due to parents choosing not to send their child back into a setting. This may be in part due to older siblings being at home during the lockdown or parents wanting to reduce the risk of infection. Providers have also shared concerns that fewer new parents started their child at early years provision in the spring term 2021 and have chosen to defer their child's start date. National restrictions have made pre-visits and settling-in more difficult to accommodate, but providers have identified alternative ways

to facilitate this including remaining open in the evening or at weekends to show parents around the setting, creating virtual tours of their provision, and using videos and WhatsApp messages to begin building relationships.

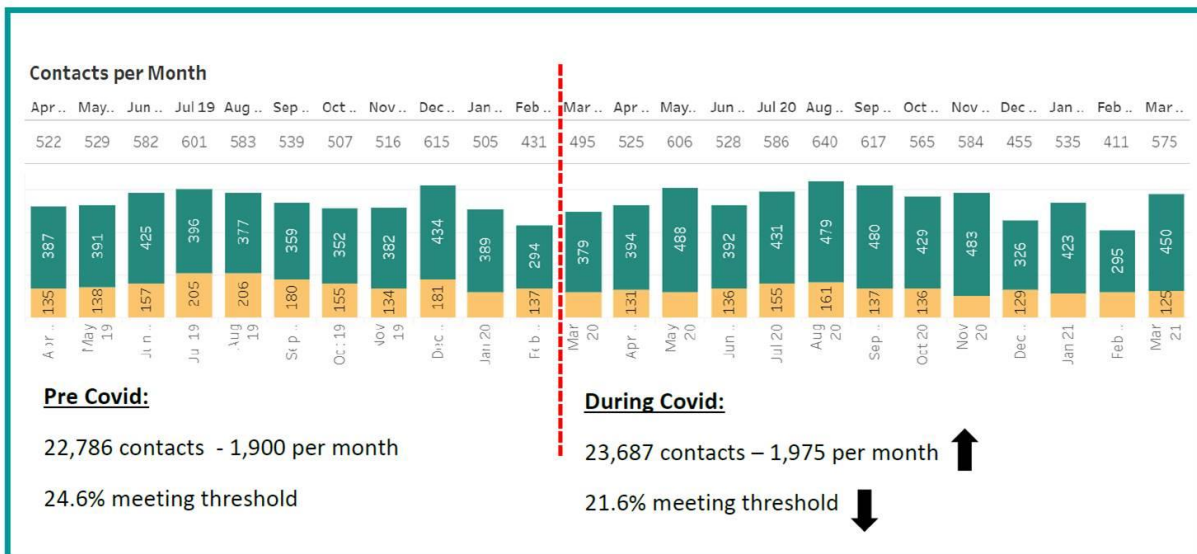
10. Almost all providers said that the first national lockdown had impacted on children's learning and development and were most concerned about the effects on children's personal, social and emotional development. Providers felt that many children missed out on the wider opportunities of attending stay and play sessions, parent and toddler groups and visits in the community during this lockdown and reported seeing a change in children's behaviour as a consequence. When asked to identify any areas of learning where they thought they had seen an improvement in children's skills during this period, providers said that parents who were able to spend more time talking to and reading with their children had had a positive impact on children's communication and language skills. Despite some children continuing to develop well, it was believed that not attending their usual early years setting has had a detrimental impact on most children's learning and development.
11. Many providers reported maintaining contact with children and families not accessing the setting due to self-isolation or parental choice during the most recent lockdown, including regular contact via telephone, Facebook, WhatsApp and Tapestry, virtual story times and sharing of activity ideas and packs. In January 2021 a list of vulnerable children was shared with providers, so they were aware of those children who attended their provision known to Children's Social Care and Early Help. This enabled providers to support families who may have chosen to stay at home to continue to send their child to the provision or maintain effective contact with them during the third national lockdown. As providers have remained open, more vulnerable children have remained at the setting and fewer providers have closed so better contact has been maintained during this period.
12. That not all parents chose for their child to attend their provision during the lockdown is particularly true of younger children with SEND. For those children who have remained at home and are known to the Early Years Inclusion and Childcare Service, weekly virtual calls and support have been made to families and advice given. Early Years SEND Advisors have used Microsoft Teams to complete video observations of children. The service has continued to support the sector with duty desk calls, three virtual appointment meetings with professionals, Area SENCO advice and Early Years SEND advisor support. Despite fewer children attending early years provision, support from these services has remained high due to providers requesting help to support children's emotional behaviour and child development.
13. Providers feel better supported with children who have additional needs and continue to use the graduated approach when identifying areas of concern with a child. One provider said that they have regular phone calls with their Area SENCO who offers advice when needed. They have also made calls to other providers about children who have moved to their setting to gather relevant information (with parents' permission). Referrals have been done in the usual way and support has been allocated. Providers have welcomed support from

their Area SENCO and Early Years SEND Advisor throughout lockdown as someone to talk to, to share their concerns with and to seek advice from.

**Safeguarding**

14. During the pandemic, work has continued within the Safeguarding Partnership to develop information and guidance for practitioners to respond to self-harm and suicide. This piece of work emerged from learning linked to previous case reviews and aims to give confidence to staff to have early conversations and provide support to young people who are seen to self-harm or to discuss suicide. The document has been a joint piece of work across LLR, with involvement of Children and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and wider agencies working with children, including school representation. The document is being finalised with plans for sign off in July 2021. A further task and finish group has also now been established to look at responses to children with emerging mental health needs so that pathways to services are understood and consistent offers of support are in place. This builds on a new pathway to improve information sharing when young people are admitted to CAMHS inpatient facilities so that a joined-up approach is in place across agencies.

15. The pandemic period has also seen a slight increase in contacts with domestic abuse (DA) as the main contact reason, although slightly fewer of these have met the statutory threshold (down from 25.6% to 21.4%).

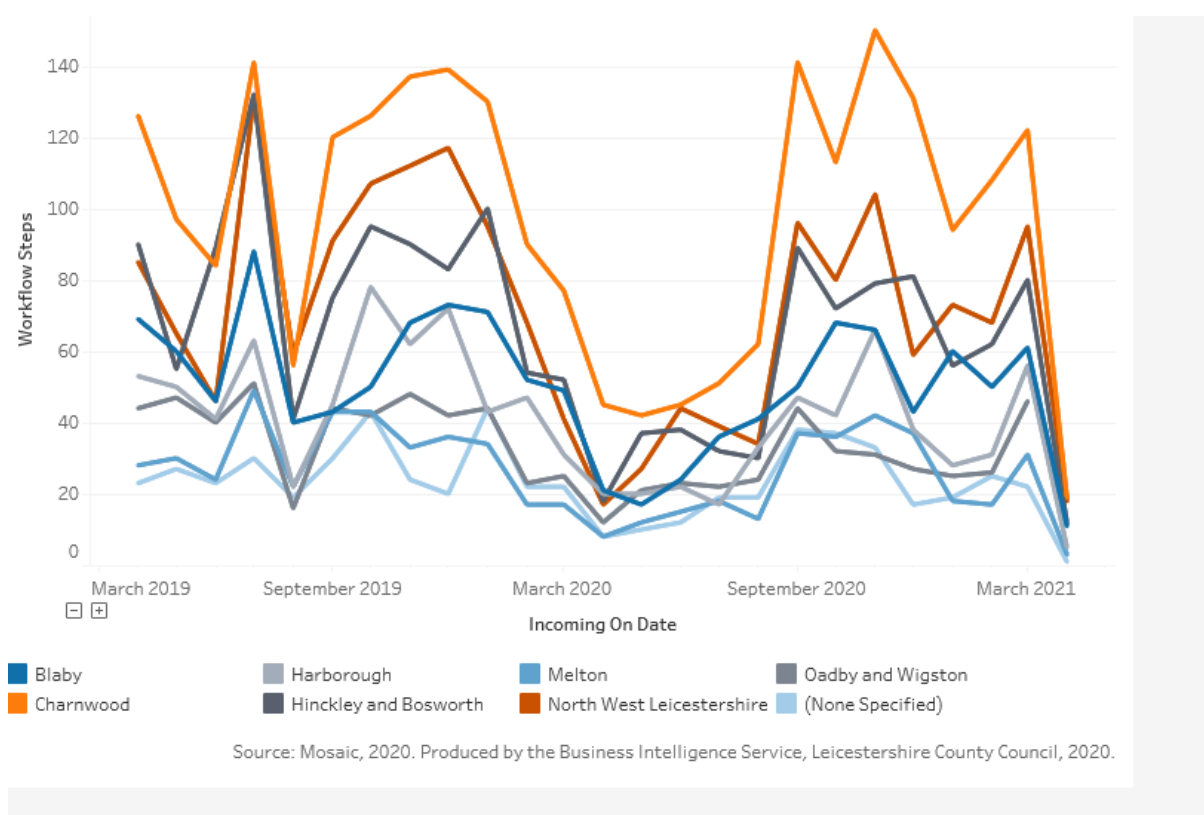


16. At the same time work has continued to develop closer working across Children’s Social Care and Early Help screening, with the appointment of a Children and Family Wellbeing Service (CFWS) screening manager into the DA screening team based at Wigston Police station. This enhanced offer aims to strengthen the pathway for families to be offered support services when incidents of domestic abuse emerge and when social work intervention is not judged to be appropriate. Early indications are now showing more cases being directed to Early Help pathways when domestic abuse is the main contact reason, but the statutory threshold is not met. This aims to link more children

to early help services to prevent escalation into statutory services in the future. A toolkit to support responses to DA has recently been launched as part of a more strategic focus on more tailored services to respond to domestic abuse more generally.

### Children and Family Wellbeing Service (CFWS)

17. The impact of Covid on referrals to CFWS has been significant in four ways and this links to impacts on children and young people. Firstly, the overall increase in the number of families referred for support. During 2020-21 a total of 2,626 families were referred to the Children and Family Wellbeing Service. This figure does not include children and young people referred to Youth Justice via the criminal justice system and does not include all families identified via the Notification of Prospective Parents workstream with midwifery. By comparison, in 2019-20 the total number of families referred was 2,292, a difference of 329 families.
18. Secondly, the usual distribution of referrals throughout the year has also been significantly disrupted, meaning that the normal pattern of peaks and troughs in referral has not been realised. One of the most striking differences was the significant drop off experienced from April 2020, in line with the first national lockdown. This is illustrated in the time series graph below.



19. In pre-Covid years, a normal pattern of referral is for numbers to remain stable from April through to June and then there is usually a significant increase in the first two weeks of July, as schools increase their rate of referral due to

concerns for the wellbeing of children over the school holidays. August is usually the quietest month for referrals, with numbers then steadily increasing towards the end of the school term. For 2020-21 the first and third national lockdowns have had greatest impact on referral rates, i.e. when children were not in school, they decreased. Figures for January 2021 were significantly lower than in previous years (243 compared to 315 in the previous year) but appear to be increasing again since schools returned, although that increase has paused over the school holidays.

20. Thirdly, the nature of the referrals received, particularly from September onwards, have been significantly different. Whilst the service has limited data on the nature of referrals, the picture is further clarified by the observation of triage and screening staff. During 2020-21 there has been a marked increase in referrals where the primary reason for referral is child mental health concerns – more than double the previous year (160 referrals versus 374). Whilst this is a significant increase, anecdotal evidence from practice suggests that this figure is much higher but may not have been identified as the main reason for the referral. Typically, high level anxiety has been seen in children alongside low mood. This increased each time children were due to return to school. In addition to child mental health concerns, the service has also seen an increase in adult mental health worries where this is having an impact on parenting, and an increase in referrals relating to child behaviour concerns. Both triage and locality teams report an increase in the complexity and multiplicity of issues seen in referrals. Not surprisingly, poverty and low income, loss of employment, housing concerns, and household conflict have all been significant factors in the referrals received.
21. Finally, service involvement with families has looked different, and some families have remained in contact with the service for longer. Whilst home visits have continued to families throughout the pandemic, the number of visits has greatly reduced and been restricted to those where the Covid-19 risk assessment indicates that a level of face to face contact was needed. Much of the service delivery has been provided 'on-line', over the telephone, and by doorstep visits to drop off resources which are then worked through with the family online. Early analysis suggests that cases have remained open to the service for a longer period than would normally be expected. It is thought that this is the result of two factors: taking longer to develop a working relationship with families due to being unable to visit and continuing uncertainty and lack of control making positive change much harder to achieve and sustain in families. Families living under stress are less likely to be able to adapt and change and then sustain that change.

## Education Effectiveness

22. Leicestershire Education Effectiveness Partnership (LEEP) undertook a survey in December 2020 to understand the “catch-up” issues for children and young people following the first lockdown. Two secondary and twenty primary schools took part and key areas identified were:

- Emotional wellbeing is a significant concern
- KS1 and KS2 writing and writing stamina and reading follows this, particularly in response to the teaching of the key skills needed to learn to read
- School readiness and independence for younger pupils
- The impact of bubble closures on time spent in school was very variable which has caused an unlevel playing field
- The retention of learning taught pre lockdown
- Issues with access to technology and devices
- Impact on SEND and the support available.

23. A further survey was undertaken to better understand the impact of remote learning on pupils during lockdown and assess the extent of a ‘digital divide’ for Leicestershire Learners. Fifty-one schools participated in this survey and the key findings of the survey were:

- The biggest barrier for Primary Schools was parental engagement, this affected most schools
- Schools felt that families with two working parents experienced the greatest barrier to Remote Learning
- Lack of devices for schools were specific to school and the circumstances,
- Primary Schools are more likely to have issues of connectivity than Secondary schools, Secondary Schools are more likely to have issues of remote learning engagement than Primary Schools, but Primary Schools are more likely to have the extreme issues
- Looked After Children and pupils with an Education Health and Care Plan had the least digital divide impact through lockdown
- There was moderate impact on Children in Need, those with English as an Additional Language and SEN groups of pupils
- Pupil Premium and Free School Meals pupils experienced the greatest impact of a digital divide during lockdown
- There was an impact on larger families having suitable access to devices during lockdown
- A general lack of engagement was more of an issue for schools than issues driven by connectivity
- Access and quality of broadband has some severe impacts but is not an overwhelming issue. The most important issue around the technical infrastructure is having enough devices and suitable devices
- Much of the feedback shows that connectivity or engagement issues are specific to a school’s location, cohort make-up or relationship with its parents,



rather than being determined by levels of Free School Meals, degree of rurality or Ofsted rating.

### **How have we responded?**

24. Staff and leaders in Leicestershire have worked tirelessly over the course of the pandemic to support the most vulnerable children during this period and have put arrangements in place to ensure scrutiny of the safety and well-being of children and young people the service supports and cares for. As a result, the service has been able to demonstrate that whilst numbers of contacts have reduced during the period of the pandemic, these have generally been those targeted at Early Help and it responded proactively to meet increased demand in key Child Protection activities such as Strategy discussions, Section 47 enquiries and Initial Child Protection conferences, giving the service confidence that it is continuing to work effectively to keep children safe. All Children in Care and children subject to child protection plans have been prioritised for allocation despite increased demand and any short-term impact of this demand in some areas of the service affecting Child in Need planning has had careful senior management oversight and systematic responses put in place for each case affected. Children in Care numbers have remained relatively stable following expected trends during this period and placement sufficiency has continued to meet demand. Placement stability has been maintained and in October is 4%.
25. Staff have been supported to maintain service delivery to children with further roll out of already established home and remote working models. Staff have made good use of mobile technology to manage day-to-day communications with children and families and used virtual meetings through Skype/Microsoft Teams for key planning and decision-making meetings. All workers have shown inventive ways of engaging children such as virtually joining in on some family time like singing or crafts. Children have fed back that they like the opportunity of using technology to show social workers their rooms and activities. Older young people, including care leavers, have informed their plan for contact ensuring a balance between preventing isolation with feelings of being overwhelmed by professional contact. Children in Care Council meetings and the Children in Care Choir have been held virtually as have other events to help children to stay connected, including a virtual ceremony for the Lord Lieutenant's Awards and an online 'Leicestershire's Got Talent' competition. The service has continued to keep close contact with all care leavers, particularly those care leavers who live alone and has financed mental health support for these young people where they don't meet the threshold for children and adolescent mental health services.
26. Since the start of lockdown, all open cases, new assessments and Targeted Early Help cases have had a Covid-19 risk assessment completed informing a risk mitigation plan. This process includes identification of safety people who are within the child's network and consideration of the child's vulnerabilities and how this may be increased in light of the lockdown. The risk assessment informs the frequency and type of contact with the child through a RAG rating

to inform the response. These are now embedded in the recording system and provide performance data to senior leaders.

27. At the start of lockdown, the department coordinated food parcels for families in crisis who were receiving a service from the department. Since March 2020 1313 food parcels have been delivered supporting 2427 children across Leicestershire, a click and collect service has operated from the four 'community fridges' at Children and Families Wellbeing Centres for in-need local residents, families have been signposted to local foodbanks and work has taken place to coordinate with Adult services where families have been 'shielding'.
28. The pandemic has required an urgent multi-agency response and in response the service has increased its dialogue with multi-agency partners. Since the start of the pandemic, weekly meetings have been taking place with key partners through multiple 'cells'; a number of these have focused on good communication and co-ordination across health, social care, education and policing. These meetings have ensured that safeguarding and service provision to children has been prioritised, and service provision in response to domestic abuse has been strengthened.
29. In May the Children's Safeguarding Partnership launched a safeguarding campaign called "Their door is closed but ours is open" to promote the reporting of concerns relating to children. The service has been keeping close oversight of the level of activity at its Front Door and has been looking at demand management and predictive modelling to consider, plan and prepare what an increase in demand would look like on service areas from September. The service was well prepared for an expected increase in demand in September following children returning to school, further loosening of lockdown rules and potential effects of a second/further lockdown. Despite an increase in contacts and referrals in September, this has been in line with previous monthly averages and the levels of activity have in fact started to stabilise. This has given assurance that the service has responded to the right children and taken the right action at the right time during lockdown.
30. Children and Family Services have continued to focus on the emotional wellbeing of young people in both the specific Covid-19 risk assessments of individual children with an allocated social worker and also by close liaison strategically with Education colleagues during lockdown. 899 laptops were received from the Department for Education (DfE) scheme and 894 have been allocated to vulnerable children either directly or via their school to allow them to maintain contact virtually.
31. Throughout the pandemic the service has offered advice, guidance and support to schools and early years providers for remote learning, on-site support for key worker and vulnerable children and returning to classrooms and settings. The strategic work with Education colleagues has also included a risk assessment process for children with EHCPs which has been embedded during lockdown and schools submitting fortnightly updates to the Local Authority. Any schools/providers that did not respond were followed up by

email and telephone call. All children who are identified by schools as at risk of not receiving appropriate support were followed up with officers making direct contact with the school and the family. The attendance data for these children was also being shared with social workers for any necessary follow up and liaison to discuss and encourage school attendance where it was safe to do so and establish good lines of communication with schools. The Virtual School have reported that virtual PEPs have been effective and that children are being supported to be prepared to contribute in the new way of holding the meeting.

32. The current use of virtual child protection conferences has introduced the use of secure email to share documents, including child protection plans and records of meetings, to all professionals and families in a timely way. The flexibility of virtual child protection conferences has seen an improvement in attendance of some partner agencies, for example GP's and CAMHS. Feedback from families has been positive and some have identified that it allows them to feel less anxious and more engaged in the meeting. Observations of meetings and feedback from partners and staff has confirmed that the quality of planning and engagement using virtual meetings has remained strong.
33. All but essential face to face contact for Children in Care with families was suspended at the outset of the pandemic and a plan to provide virtual contacts was implemented. Changes in regulations and guidance along with a greater understanding of Covid-19 and robust risk management have enabled resumption of some face-to-face contacts where deemed safe. Work was undertaken to ensure contact centres met Covid Safe Guidelines, allowing a hybrid model of face to face and virtual contact being established from July 2020 following the initial lockdown. The service is maintaining its commitment to facilitate some face-to-face contact prioritised according to communication with the local courts, children and their families and carers as guidance and restrictions change.
34. The service has continued to invest in its family of foster carers by providing access to excellent training and support and foster carers have been a key focus during the pandemic. The department made use of its on-line portal which allowed it to get information out rapidly and it established an 'invite-only' fostering Facebook account to ensure it could get messages out to carers quickly, provide offers of support, activity ideas and offer a forum for carers to share and support one another. The service sourced and distributed bespoke family hampers for all its foster carers and supported living placements containing activities, pizza making/cookie kits, therapeutic books and games which were very gratefully received. Training for carers has continued to be delivered virtually and the Facebook group continues to be well used for peer support and communication.
35. DfE has recognised that school holidays can be pressure points for some families because of increased costs and reduced incomes and that some children are more likely to experience 'unhealthy holidays' in terms of nutrition and physical health. In response to this the DfE has expanded its Holiday Activities and Food funding to all local authorities for 2021 so that children on

free school meals in England can be offered free healthy meals and enriching activities over the Easter, summer and Christmas holidays. Leicestershire County Council has been awarded up to £1,323,150 to co-ordinate holiday provision over summer and Christmas and the service is currently working with partners to co-ordinate planning for the local programme.

### **Resource Implications**

36. The longer-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic is not yet clear but may result in further increases in the number of children and families requiring support with concerns over their short-term and long-term educational achievement and mental health.

### **Conclusion**

37. The Committee is asked to consider the content of the report.

### **Equality and Human Rights Implications**

38. There are no specific equality or human rights implications arising from this report. The Children and Family Service has an interest in ensuring that there are effective arrangements in place so that the services provided meet the identified needs of local children, young people and families.

### **Background papers**

<https://www.youngpeopleshealth.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Impact-of-Covid-19-on-young-people-briefing.pdf>

<https://www.barnardos.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/mental-health-covid19-in-our-own-words-report.pdf>

### **Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure**

39. None

### **Officers to Contact**

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### **List of Appendices**

Appendix A: Safeguarding Children Partnership - Coronavirus Health & Wellbeing Conversation for Young People across Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland, June 2020