

TITLE OF REPORT: Children's Social Care Services Response to Covid19
REPORT OF: Caroline O'Neil, Strategic Director – Children, Adults and Families

Summary

This report provides a summary of the actions taken by Gateshead Children Social Care Service in response to Covid19 and the response to managing safeguarding and supporting vulnerable children.

Background

1. As a result of the Covid19 pandemic, and the national lockdown, which was put in place on 23 March 2020, local authorities needed to rethink how they continued to operate and provide for those most in need of care, support and protection.
2. Initially this was a very difficult challenge for all local authorities and Gateshead was no exception given the speed at which the country moved into a lockdown position to try and contain the risk of infection and spread of the virus.
3. National and regional guidance was sought in the immediate aftermath of the lockdown and the DfE issued Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance for children's social care services document. This enabled Gateshead to consider changes to how child protection and care services were delivered, in the event of staffing pressures i.e. shielding and self-isolation and complying with social distancing requirements.
4. The government has indicated that subject to consultation, the vast majority of the flexibilities they provide will expire on 25 September 2020 other than provisions relating to virtual visits, inspections and the timing of medical reports in the fostering and adoption processes.
5. The Gateshead Response
 - Council produced risk assessments put in place for all Children's Homes to identify and manage responses to potential Covid19 risks (Appendices 1 and 2).
 - Council produced risk assessments put in place for all contact and visits between children social care staff and children/families (Appendices 3 and 4).

- Grove House, short break care home for children and young people with disabilities – remained open with a reduced number of children in receipt of overnight care at any one time.
- Fostering panels moved to virtual to facilitate panel attendance and be compliant with regulatory requirements.
- Following Court closures in March and reopening from June, all children in care proceeding were RAG rated and prioritisation given to when court work could be issued, and hearings reinstated.
- Performance data trackers developed to track and monitor all children deemed vulnerable and ensure those children who are at highest risk are seen, supported and protected (Appendix 5).
- Regional Senior Leadership local authority meetings held to discuss and review changes in demand and determine local responses to the pandemic (Appendix 6).
- Staff redeployed from wider Children Social Care Services and Early Help Services into Children's Homes to ensure and provide staffing resilience.
- Review of recruitment and progression processes to ensure that any staffing vacancies and absences can be covered speedily and with suitability qualified/experienced staff.
- Realignment of business support services to support remote working arrangements across the service.
- All staff provided with suitable IT equipment to support remote working, virtual meetings and visiting requirements.
- Flexible working arrangements, including out of hours cover for specialist teams such as the Domestic Abuse Service and fostering services, to ensure that responses can be timely and meet demand.
- A core group of senior managers remain in the Civic Centre to respond to emergency/crisis situations. A weekly senior management meeting is held and routinely includes representatives from Finance, HR, Health and Safety, to discuss the practicalities of delivering services during a pandemic.
- Children Social Care are producing a recovery plan that will support staff as we move through the reducing restrictions and changes in regulatory guidance.
- The Council's Social Care and Education Teams worked together to identify those children that would most benefit from returning to school. Approximately 70% of the identified pupils returned to school.
- Team Managers and their Service Managers meet every week, via teams and/or in person.
- As the lockdown restrictions lift, guidance has been issued and arrangements put in place for the reintroduction of family time, allowing those children who are in foster care, to have safe contact with their birth parents and siblings (Appendix 7).

Recommendations

6. OSC is asked to note the contents of the report.