

TITLE OF REPORT: Children's Social Care and Early Help Services
Response to impact of Omicron variant

REPORT OF: Andrea Houlahan, Deputy Strategic Director –
Children, Adults and Families

Purpose of the report

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

Background

1. As a result of the latest Covid19 variant and its impact over the festive period, further changes have been needed to operate and provide for those most in need of care, support and protection.
2. National and Regional guidance has been sought which has enabled Gateshead to consider how child protection and care services can be delivered, in the event of staffing pressures i.e. covid sickness absences, self-isolation and complying with social distancing requirements.
3. Unlike in previous national lockdowns and peaks during the pandemic, the government has not implemented any flexibilities currently and all services are required to function on a business-as-usual basis. Statutory visits must be face to face, inspections are continuing and the timing of assessments, key child protection meetings such as child protection conferences and activity such as medical reports in the fostering and adoption processes, are all within the regulatory timescales as in existence prior to the pandemic.

Current situation

4. Current actions taken in response to Omicron –
 - Council produced risk assessments put in place for all Children's Homes to identify and manage responses to potential Covid19 risks
 - Grove House, short break care home for children and young people with disabilities – needed to close for 2 days due to 1 child testing positive but is remaining open with a reduced number of children in receipt of overnight care at any one time when required.

- Fostering panels are face to face with the facility to move to virtual if required to facilitate panel attendance and member attendance. However, virtual panels will not be regulatory compliant.
- RAG rated performance data trackers re-established to track and monitor all children deemed vulnerable and ensure those children who are at highest risk are seen, supported and protected.
- Regional Senior Leadership local authority meetings held fortnightly to discuss and review changes in demand and determine local responses to the pandemic
- Where appropriate staff encouraged to redeploy from wider Children Social Care Services and Early Help Services into Children's Homes to provide ensure and provide staffing resilience.
- Recruitment and progression trackers established to ensure that any staffing vacancies and absences can be covered speedily and with suitability qualified/experienced staff.
- Senior Officer rotas are in place to ensure there is always a management presence in the Civic Centre, to respond to emergency/crisis situations.
- Weekly senior management meeting held which routinely includes representatives from Finance and HR, to discuss the practicalities of delivering services during the pandemic.
- Covid recovery plan updated to reflect any changes in practice and restrictions in response to national government regulatory guidance.
- Social Care and Education Teams working together to identify children not in school due to covid impact can receive additional support.
- Staffing absences to be tracked daily using the Itrent system to determine greatest pressure demands and realign workers where required

Additional Service Pressures

5. Children Social Care and Early Help are due to go live with a new IT system (Mosaic) on the 24th January. Whilst this work is on track, it has become increasingly challenging for staff to complete training modules, data cleansing and migration tasks due to covid absences and cover arrangements required for colleagues.
6. The impact of Covid on the Mosaic implementation timetable will continue to be tightly monitored. **NOTE - Go Live date cannot be altered without significant cost to the Council**
7. Since lockdown in April 2020, CSC and Early Help have seen a significant increase in children who require intervention and support, and in the summer of 2020, Gateshead experienced the highest number of children in the care system (454) that it had ever seen. This number has now been exceeded over the Christmas period 2021 where we reached an all-time high of 631. This is creating significant placement pressures and demand in the system and has resulted in a significant increase in costs due to the need for more Independent fostering agency placements and external residential placements

Recommendations

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

Contact: Andrea Houlahan

Extension: 2782