

 <b>Brent</b>	<p align="center"><b>Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee</b></p> <p align="center"><b>24 November 2020</b></p>
	<p align="center"><b>Report from the Strategic Director, Children and Young People</b></p>
<p><b>Brent Council's Management of the Impact of Covid 19 on Education Settings and Children's Services</b></p>	

<b>Wards Affected:</b>	All
<b>Key or Non-Key Decision:</b>	n/a
<b>Open or Part/Fully Exempt:</b> (If exempt, please highlight relevant paragraph of Part 1, Schedule 12A of 1972 Local Government Act)	Open
<b>No. of Appendices:</b>	None
<b>Background Papers:</b>	none
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## 1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 This report updates members on the management by the Children and Young People (CYP) department of the impact of the pandemic on Children's Services, the support for vulnerable children and young people during the response, lockdown and recovery phases, as well as planning for the winter and the second wave of Covid 19. This report adds to the information provided to the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee on 21<sup>st</sup> July that gave an overview of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic emergency on a number of key Council services, including Children's Services.

## 2.0 Recommendation

- 2.1 Members of the Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee are asked to note and comment on the content of this report.

## 3.0 Detail – Response to the Pandemic

- 3.1 As reported to this Scrutiny Committee in July, Brent CYP took swift and targeted action to support children and families from the beginning of the pandemic and throughout the initial

national lockdown period, ensuring that children's safeguarding needs continued to be met. Further to the report to this Scrutiny Committee in July, the CYP Department has implemented a comprehensive plan, focused on key actions to continue to develop the response to the needs of vulnerable children and families.

- 3.2 As reported to Scrutiny Committee in July, revised practice guidance was issued on 16th March to support practitioners in risk assessment, prioritisation of contact with children and families and to support home visits where appropriate. This guidance has been regularly updated, most recently on 4th November 2020 in response to the current lockdown period.
- 3.3 Every child known to CYP (including Children in Need, Children subject to a Child Protection Plan, children with an Education, Health and Care Plan, young people known to the Youth Offending Service and Looked After Children and Care Leavers) has been risk assessed, with contact arrangements by telephone or home visits in place based on identified levels of risk, with a focus on maintaining relationships throughout the period of the pandemic.
- 3.4 Relationships with partner agencies have remained effective, managing the challenge of the impact of Covid-19 on the capacity within the health economy with many CCG staff being redeployed to support the NHS response to the pandemic. Multi-agency governance boards have continued to provide oversight of delivery for children and families, including the Health and Wellbeing Board, the Children's Trust and the Community Safety Partnership, Safer Brent.
- 3.5 This report sets out more detail further to the July Scrutiny report as to the impact of Covid-19, how Brent Council services have responded to this impact and the support provided for children and families.

#### **4.0 Early Years Settings and Schools**

- 4.1 The vast majority of schools and a number of early years settings remained open for the children of key workers and vulnerable children throughout between March and June. As reported to Scrutiny Committee in July, the Strategic Director Children and Young People advised and supported schools to form geographic clusters from the start of the pandemic, an arrangement which has continued to support resilience in the sector and facilitated the sharing of good practice. The Strategic Director has continued to convene regular meetings with headteachers and regular webinars for early years providers and Chairs of Governors with the Strategic Director which have allowed timely, two way communication and the provision of tailored advice. Regular written briefings have also been provided to settings and schools. The Director of Public Health (DPH) has been a regular attendee at the webinars, to provide public health advice. The feedback from early years settings and schools has been very positive regarding both the webinars and published briefings provided by the Council.
- 4.2 Brent CYP has been active promoting attendance of vulnerable pupils throughout the pandemic period. The Strategic Director has chaired fortnightly meetings of the Children's Services Leadership Team to oversee coordination work to support vulnerable children during the lockdown and recovery periods.
- 4.3 In preparation for the government's requested wider opening from 1 June, schools updated their risk assessments and plans. Public Health and CYP supported early years settings and schools with infection prevention training which was accessed by over 900 members of staff. Supplementary PPE was also provided to early years settings and schools in line with government guidelines. CYP also coordinated the procurement of signage on behalf of

schools for wider opening. The Operational Director, Safeguarding, Partnerships and Strategy, working with Brent Health and Safety team advisors, reviewed risk assessments from all community schools and on request from some voluntary aided and academy schools.

- 4.4 Brent Council have built upon this support to ensure that early years settings and schools successfully and fully opened from the beginning of the Autumn term. Further advice has been provided by Brent Council on early years settings and schools risk assessment reviews, coordinating the provision of further supplementary PPE and personal protective measures training, advice and practical assistance on traffic management and access for schools as well as information regarding local testing sites. Positive feedback has been received from settings, schools and Trade Union representatives on this support.
- 4.5 The impact of Covid-19 on the early years sector, in particular the Private Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector, has been significant and could affect overall sufficiency in the months to come as many settings are concerned about their financial viability. The Brent CYP Early Years Service has been proactive in supporting PVI providers, including helping PVI providers access financial support through the discretionary Additional Restrictions Grant for businesses. Over the summer, 50 providers were supported to access this grant. However, the early years provider survey conducted over the summer continues to indicate that more than half of providers in the PVI sector are worried about future sustainability. Work continues to be undertaken to support ongoing early years sufficiency and to improve take up of early years entitlements by Brent parents and carers, given the sustainability challenges being faced by early years providers.
- 4.6 From the outset of the pandemic in March, Brent schools have been assessing their pupils to identify the gaps in their learning which has informed on-going modifications to the delivery of the curriculum. To support schools to close the gaps the DfE announced the Covid-19 Catch-up Premium in July. This is additional funding to support pupils who fell behind in their learning during the first lockdown period. Schools are using the funding to accelerate progress through tailored teaching activities which include small group or one-to-one tuition and extra teaching capacity including after school lessons.
- 4.7 During their partial closure, Brent schools quickly developed their on-line teaching platforms and resources to teach pupils remotely. They also provided teaching and learning packs for children who did not have the required access for on-line learning. The development of remote learning has been on-going to ensure that when pupils or teachers have to isolate because of Covid-19 outbreaks, their learning and teaching can continue as seamlessly as possible. The DfE is continuing to distribute digital devices to schools to support pupils who have to isolate because of Covid-19.
- 4.8 Schools have also planned and implemented support for pupils' mental health and wellbeing, recognising that some pupils will have been exposed to a range of adversity and trauma including bereavement, anxiety and in some cases increased welfare and safeguarding risks.
- 4.9 Senior leaders in CYP have been monitoring and promoting full school attendance from the start of the Autumn term in September to ensure a full return to school. Social workers wrote to parents and carers of children known to Brent to encourage full attendance from the beginning of term. Correspondence has also been sent to foster carers emphasising the importance of school attendance for our Looked After Children.
- 4.10 The Brent Borough Plan 2019-2023 has a priority to raise the attainment of particular groups and narrow the gap with their peers for Boys of Black Caribbean heritage. Work has continued with Brent schools to deliver this priority. The "Update on schools and education,

including action plan for raising achievement of British boys of Black Caribbean heritage” report, presented to this Scrutiny Committee alongside this report, sets out an overview of the effectiveness of education in Brent, and the work that has taken place in the past year to support raising the achievement of boys of Black Caribbean heritage and other priority groups, and plans to maintain this focus in the current academic year.

- 4.11 The Brent COVID 19 Management Plan, reported to Health and Wellbeing Board 29 June 2020, includes details of the arrangements to support early years settings and schools in the case of positive tests for Covid-19 of either children attending a setting, pupils or members of staff. This includes details of the single point of contact for early years settings and schools. Schools have complied fully with the plan, informing the local authority in a timely manner when a positive test has been identified and updating risk assessments as necessary throughout the autumn term. Since the beginning of term, as of the 6th November a total of 36 of Brent’s 87 schools have seen a total of 61 incidents of a positive case of Covid-19, for either a pupil or member of staff. On average between 10 and 15 schools have been impacted by periods of self isolation at any one time during the autumn term. In line with each school’s risk assessment and advice from the DfE Coronavirus helpline, relevant groups of pupils and staff have been told to remain at home and self isolate for 14 days.
- 4.12 The number of families choosing to electively home educate (EHE) has grown since the beginning of the autumn term. The total EHE cohort is 328 having risen from 229 at the beginning of the academic year, an increase of 43%. The relevant processes are being followed once CYP are notified of these arrangements by the school where the child was most recently educated. Some of the reasons provided by parents as to why they have decided to pursue EHE are that they wanted to continue providing their child’s education which they had undertaken in spring/summer 2020 and for others that there is continued anxiety about sending their child to school. For the small number of children known to CYP whose parents have decided to EHE, close monitoring arrangements are in place.

## **5.0 Early Help**

- 5.1 Agencies have continued to work together to support vulnerable young people, specifically in managing immediate risk for individual children and young people. Early Help Assessment e-learning was made available for all partners to access along with bespoke training via Microsoft Teams and Zoom. The majority of children and families have received virtual support, either online or by phone.
- 5.2 Throughout the first period of lockdown, between March and early July, the Early Help offer ensured support was in place for vulnerable children and families. COVID-19 risk assessments were introduced for all families, to determine priority families for whom face to face visits from the Family Solutions Team through “doorstep” visits were deemed essential.
- 5.3 There has been an increase in demand for early help support through the duration of the pandemic. An average of 40 new cases a week were being received into the Early Help service in April. Since September, the average number of new cases a week to the Early Help service has increased to 200.
- 5.4 CYP maintained close links with schools and supported vulnerable children and young people to encourage onsite attendance and/ or engage with the online learning provision through the Education Welfare Service, who worked closely with social work teams and other professionals to support vulnerable children and young people, prioritising children and young people for whom there were safeguarding concerns. Education Welfare Officers

delivered support in line with CYP home visiting guidance and kept in regular contact with families by phone or internet video calling. EWOs sought to obtain the voice of the child during each contact.

- 5.5 Out of hours telephone support for young people has continued to be provided through the Accelerated Support Team which was well received and meant that young people had enhanced contact at times which suited them. The feedback from this engagement has informed the ongoing service offer, with more telephone appointments and contact being offered where appropriate in the early evening and weekends.
- 5.6 There are 730 identified young carers in Brent. Young carer referrals to the Carers Gateway Partnership, the locally commissioned support provider has continued as usual throughout this period. The Gateway Partnership has two dedicated Young Carer Support Officers and during lockdown they made regular phone/video contact with young carers to offer information, advice and guidance, share online resources and activities that could be completed at home. Young carers were also signposted to:
- A Young Carer online forum for peer support.
  - The Children's Society Support Care Team who provide live online chat support 10am-4pm, Monday to Friday.
  - The Mix, which provides information and advice to young carers on issues such as mental health, relationships and money and a free crisis messenger service from 4pm-11pm, seven days a week.
- 5.7 Officers from Early Help were in regular contact with the Gateway Partnership to ensure continuity of service and support for young carers and to identify any emerging issues or concerns, for example 5 young carers were identified who did not have access to a laptop/ tablet and/ or data and they were provided with resources to enable digital access. Young carers and their families, with an Early Help Assessment or Child and Family Assessment, were able to access support from the Early Help Resource panel. Services such as counselling, mentoring and family befriending were available and accessible by remote contact.
- 5.8 A series of face-to-face activities took place for young carers over the Autumn half-term break including a Halloween themed art competition, games and a nature trail activity. Many young carers felt isolated during the first lockdown and there were added pressures because of their caring responsibilities. Since schooling resumed for all pupils from September, young carers have been able to get respite from caring, socialise with their friends and speak to trusted adults about their concerns. Pathways are in place for schools to refer young carers to universal and targeted support where necessary
- 5.9 Roundwood Youth Centre activities reopened in May 2020 following social distancing guidelines. The centre's current activities are in the process of transition to the Roundwood Alternative Provision school with wrap around youth offer which will open in January 2021. A new and exciting offer for young people will be publicised in December to coincide with the opening of the new school as planned.
- 5.10 Current arrangements with Barnardo's have been reviewed in preparation for the opening of Family Wellbeing Centres (FWCs). The proposed FWCs will open from December 2020 across a number of locations across the borough, with the majority of services being operational from January 2021.
- 6.0 Children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCP)**

- 6.1 The Inclusion Strategic Partnership responded immediately to the first lockdown in March by making a commitment to keep in touch and stay connected to parents/carers, children and young people with SEND. There was rapid collaboration and coordination between the Council, CCG and health providers to ensure children with specific health needs continued to receive the necessary support.
- 6.2 The Inclusion Service worked alongside education settings to ensure that all children and young people were supported to access their education and health provision. For the most vulnerable children attending special schools this alliance was strengthened by weekly meetings with headteachers and specialist health services, and, when relevant, transport services, to ensure children and young people could remain in school where possible. Brent's outreach services worked with parents to support children to access the curriculum at home. The Early Years Inclusion Service worked alongside private, voluntary and independent nurseries to support as many early years' providers to be Covid compliant and remain open. The Educational Psychology team held on line 'drop-ins' for parents and carers to support parental wellbeing as well as child wellbeing. They also provided a bespoke wellbeing service for care leavers. All children with an EHCP were risk assessed. Play areas were made available at one special school for parents to book and access to respite care was provided through the Ade Adepitan Centre.
- 6.3 Throughout the pandemic period the Inclusion Service has continued to work closely with the Brent Parent Carer Forum to provide assurance to parents and carers. Online workshops have been delivered and the "The Big conversation" for return to school in September was held where 40 parents and carers could ask professionals about supporting their children to return to school safely. Additional workshops have taken place and have enabled parents to access information on, for example, transitions and understanding how to turn aspirations into actions and outcomes all supported by multiagency professionals from education, health and care. Parents reported that meeting professionals on line strengthened relationships and removed any barriers they might have felt.
- 6.4 Early years, school, health and transport planning meetings have continued into the Autumn term as have the online workshops for parents and carers. Transition sessions were held virtually so that children and young people were well prepared to go to their new school or college provision. Meetings with headteachers were held to confirm readiness for the new term regarding Covid compliance, recovery curriculum and transportation. To support children with very specialist health needs, Brent Council supplied special schools with essential specialist personal protective equipment. Attendance rates during the first half-term settled at 90% for children with an EHCP with the national average at 82%. Going into November the Inclusion Service is rolling out the national Wellbeing Return to School programme across all schools in Brent.
- 6.5 For children with more complex needs requiring social care input, the type and amount of support offered to families was increased, driven by a higher demand for support. When the March lockdown began many families said that they no longer wanted to have outside carers coming into their homes. A flexible approach was adopted to the provision of direct payments, allowing parents and carers to engage their own family members as carers for the duration of the lockdown. The short break centre (the Ade Adepitan centre) was unable to offer overnight respite for a 2-month period and was used instead to provide carefully protected day care services for the most vulnerable children. As the lockdown progressed a small number of families found it very difficult to cope without their usual support network. In order to avoid family breakdowns a number of immediate, high intensity support packages were set up to ensure that parents were able to keep their children within the home setting. One result of these interventions is that no disabled child entered the care system throughout the outbreak, between March and November.

- 6.6 In terms of maintaining effective communication with families an advisory line was established to provide advice and support. There was an increase in meetings with the Brent Parent Carer Forum so that concerns could be shared. Increased play scheme places were offered during the summer holiday period so that an additional 80 families were able to receive this extra support. Covid guidance links have been posted onto the website advertising the Local Offer for families with a disabled child on a regular basis between March and November.
- 6.7 Brent CCG reported to Brent Children's Trust on 22 September 2020 on the health economy and on service restoration for children in Brent, after the restrictions of the initial Covid emergency. The report highlighted that many services had been restored fully or partially but there remained a number of children's health services not yet delivering at pre-Covid levels. Assurances were sought and received that the amber ratings associated with community therapy support and support to the EHCP process from health providers were being prioritised.
- 6.8 The report provided assurance that
- NHS key workers in Brent were able to continue to send their children to school to enable them to offer essential health services.
  - NHS Brent CCG, Brent GPs, and London North West University Healthcare NHS Trust paediatric services collaborated to establish video and telephone consultation systems to ensure Brent children had access to timely medical advice.
  - In Brent, children's health services pooled staffing resources to ensure children with clinical care packages continued to receive necessary care. The needs of children with
  - Education, Health, and Care Plans (EHCPs) were reviewed on a multi-agency basis to ensure health needs were met.
  - On 1 September 2020, NWL ICS has presented assurance to NHS England and NHS Improvement that the Phase 3 expectations will be met, and any areas where the required standards cannot be met will have plans in place to do so as soon as possible

## **7.0 Children in Need and Children subject of a Child Protection Plan**

- 7.1 The multi-agency Brent Family Front Door has continued to operate effectively, with good working relationships with partners which was sustained while using a remote working model when necessary due to COVID-19.
- 7.2 Child protection conferences moved to virtual conferences starting from the first lockdown in March. Guidance was promptly issued to parents and multi-agency partners that was updated as learning developed and new technological solutions were found. As national restrictions regarding the pandemic eased a hybrid child protection conference model, enabling a combination of physical attendance at meetings and online or telephone attendance, was developed based on risk and need assessments.
- 7.3 During the period April to October, positive feedback from parents was received on the new ways of working and parental feedback has helped inform how blended virtual and in person conference meetings are held. Feedback was obtained from child protection conferences regarding 55 children between April and October 2020. Of the 43 parents who scored the conference on a scale of 0 to 10, the average score was 8. Feedback ranged from "It was difficult by phone I would prefer face to face contact" to "I found the conference helpful and felt that I was listened to" and "I found the conference helpful and felt that I was listened to from professionals. The interpreting was good and I understood". Multi agency professional feedback has been very positive and comments received including "really easy

to follow despite being in remote mode“ and “well constructed and managed, parents were allowed to express their views and opinions were taken into account.“ Overall there has been enhanced multi-agency engagement in child protection conferences and longer term the benefits of continuing a hybrid model of virtual and physical attendance are being considered.

- 7.4 The level of contacts through the Brent Family Front Door declined significantly through April and May, with contacts at approximately 50% of the rate at the same time last year. Contact rates then increased, returning to comparatively similar levels to previous years through June, July and August. The average number of contacts in April and May were just under 2000 a month. Since September and the return of children to school the number has increased significantly. In October there were 3010 contacts in the month, an increase of 50% on the number in April and a higher number of referrals than in previous years.
- 7.5 Aligned to the increase in contacts, the number of child referrals has increased. In April there were 275 referrals across the month, whereas in October the number had risen to 453. This represents an increase of 64%. An increase in referrals was anticipated when children returned to school. In the early phase of lockdown, the majority of referrals were from the police but in October there were 50% more referrals from schools and education settings than from the police. Many of the referrals received since September are highly complex cases as children talk to trusted adults in schools and settings about their experiences.
- 7.6 The number of Initial Child Protection Conferences (ICPCs) mirrors this increase in demand for services. The number of ICPCs was at its lowest in April, increasing over the summer and reaching a peak of 61 in the month of October.
- 7.7 The increased demand for services is also seen in the pressure on statutory social work services with a significant increase in the total number of allocated cases across both Localities and LAC and Permanency since September. There were 2273 allocated cases at the end of April and this number reduced to 2222 in the first week of September. At the end of October the number of allocated cases had risen to 2439, which is an increase of 9.7% since September.
- 7.8 There have also been increased challenges in keeping vulnerable adolescents at home and safe, particularly during the first lockdown. Case learning from the Contextual Safeguarding Strategic Group over the past six months during the Covid-19 pandemic period has identified the following themes, which are expanded upon in the “Contextual Safeguarding Update” report being considered by the Committee, alongside this report:
- Significant reduction in missing episodes and first time missing young people.
  - Increase in Substance Misuse and Criminal Behaviour amongst the missing cohort.
  - Mental health concerns for young people continued and were in many cases exacerbated through the period of lockdown, where protective relationships and social contacts were not possible.
  - The COVID-19 pandemic has also impacted county lines activity and the young people being supported.
- 7.9 Effective planning was put in place to deal with the expected increase in referrals when schools and settings fully returned in September. As described above, the anticipated significant pressure on frontline social work services did occur during September and October. It is anticipated that this will reduce during late November but it will be closely monitored to ensure caseloads remain at safe levels so that social workers can continue to practice safeguarding work effectively. CYP are only resourced to meet the current levels of



demand. Any further significant increase in levels of demand for services may impede services' ability to manage effectively without additional resources.

- 7.10 Restoring increased face to face work with children subject of Child Protection plans, LAC and Care Leavers has been a key priority, with particular attention paid to impact for children and families from the first lockdown period and risks regarding post trauma and bereavement. Technology which has been utilised through the first lockdown period continues to be used to enhance the support for children, both through statutory meetings and regular contact and support.

## **8.0 Looked After Children and Care Leavers**

- 8.1 Updates on support for Brent Looked After Children and Care Leavers during this period were reported to the Corporate Parenting Committee in July and October 2020.
- 8.2 The number of new looked after children since the start of the Autumn term mirrors the increase in demand for services seen across CYP. There were 26 and 23 new looked after children in September and October respectively compared to 7 in April and May and 16 in July/August.
- 8.3 Covid-19 and the lockdowns have impacted on children in care and care leavers in various ways. A number of children, foster carers and young people had to self-isolate in their placements or accommodation when they or someone in the household displayed symptoms. Following risk assessments, face to face contact between children and their birth families was restricted to video and telephone calls. Although most young people were content with the new way of contact, there were some, particularly younger children, who understandably struggled not seeing their parents face to face.
- 8.4 The impact of loneliness, being unable to attend educational settings, visit friends or family face to face during lockdown has been evident. Young people, particularly care leavers who reside in their own accommodation, have struggled with boredom and anxiety caused in part by inaccurate information on social media on how to keep themselves safe. Most of their leisure activities and hobbies were put on hold as well as the routine structure of their day to day routine such as going to school, college, university or workplace.
- 8.5 Covid-19 has also had a financial impact on care leavers. Young people found they needed to spend more on food shopping as they were initially trying to buy from independent stores. They have had higher utility costs due to being inside for prolonged periods and using higher internet data costs. Some care leavers have lost jobs they previously held so are having to work to a tighter budget.
- 8.6 Children who are looked after continued to be supported by their allocated social workers during the first Covid-19 lockdown, with the majority of statutory visits being conducted online. Although some children and young people were reluctant to engage via video chat, it was evident that for most they were comfortable with this new way of working. For those who were more reluctant or where there were complex issues of risk, face to face visits took place, following a risk assessment. Since the end of the first lockdown and during the current lockdown period, most children are being seen face to face.
- 8.7 Contact between children and their birth families was carefully risk-assessed taking into account national guidance and delivered primarily at the Council's contact centre (Freeman Family Centre).
- 8.8 Social workers demonstrated creativity in engaging children and young people virtually during the first lockdown period and took a flexible approach to ensure that children and

young people were as comfortable and relaxed as possible. Some examples from social workers' visits to children demonstrate this engagement during the first lockdown period:

*'E' looked smiley and happy, sat in her room, eating a packet of crisps. I asked her to put the blinds up in her room, to let some of the light in. She did so as I was speaking, and asking her why she is avoiding my calls, and not really responding to my text messages. E said, 'because you're old'. I laughed and said I haven't always been this old! I am likely to be one of the youngest social workers she has had, and we have such a great bond! E laughed and agreed. I joked that I can ask for another social worker who will be even OLDER than I am. She said she knows, doesn't want this. I empathised with her situation, and asked if she is just avoiding me because she doesn't like phone conversations? This has always been something that she has said. E said yes. I then asked if she would prefer speaking face to face, and she nodded. We agreed to have our next meeting soon, and I would text her of the day and time I plan to come down and see her.*

*The children appeared to be managing with the lockdown rules. During my video call the children showed me round the garden and how they have moved things around because they are planning on getting a garden pool soon. All three children appeared very happy. They were showing me what they were doing and telling about how hard they are working to ensure that they keep their school work up to date. The children are very cheerful and enjoy talking to me on the phone.*

*C was in the front room with the foster carer when I called and seemed excited to have the call. He took the phone and went up to his room. C was wearing a blue t-shirt and navy tracksuit bottoms. C showed me a balloon in his room and started doing kick-ups with it while we spoke. We started chatting about basketball and NBA teams and played a game where C had to name as many as he could in 5 minutes, I set a timer and wrote down the teams he named and he managed to name 25 out of 30! He was pleased with this and at the end of the call I said we could play the game again next time, he suggested he could also name Formula 1 teams and then listed all of them and the drivers while we spoke! When he gave the phone back to the foster carer he told her about how well he did naming the NBA teams.*

- 8.9 The LAC and Permanency Service has maintained a log of all children, foster carers and young people who have self-isolated either because they had symptoms or where household members had symptoms/shielding. Maintaining this log has helped ensure that children, foster carers and care leavers are receiving the necessary support and intervention.

- 8.10 Upon governmental guidance in March that a lockdown on movement was to be put into place, a risk assessment of Brent foster carers was undertaken, noting those who were particularly vulnerable due to underlying health conditions or their age. Additional information was gathered regarding which carers would be affected by school closures or put at a disadvantage financially due to their employment status. Regular communication detailing the support available and clarity around government guidance in relation to the impact of Covid-19 on contact, education and social interaction has been shared weekly (or more often where necessary) via a newsletter. Feedback from foster carers has been that they have felt well supported during this pandemic by the team and senior managers.
- 8.11 In addition to emotional support, an offer was circulated that foster carers could approach their supervising social worker if they began to experience hardship directly linked to being furloughed, losing employment or purchasing additional equipment. No carers have taken this offer forward to date and the majority report they are managing well on the resources they have. Fostering allowances were paid slightly earlier to allow for any delay in processing, which the carers have positively appreciated.
- 8.12 CYP teams worked effectively with LAC Health partners to ensure that the health of looked after children and young people was prioritised. Initial Health Assessments continued to be undertaken face to face with Brent paediatricians. It is understood that Brent is the only local authority in the country where this continued. Brent CCG in its report to Brent Children's Trust on 22 September 2020 recognised that further work needed be undertaken regarding the full resumption of service for looked after children and looked after children's health assessments. Brent Children's Trust continues to monitor delivery with LAC Health partners during the current second period of lockdown.
- 8.13 LAC health professionals have provided a telephone follow-up service to children in care and care leavers who have been identified by the LAC and Permanency service as in a household that is self-isolating due to Covid-19 symptoms.
- 8.14 Brent Virtual School (BVS) for Looked after Children provided online learning opportunities to children in care as well as virtual workshops to foster carers to support them during the pandemic. The BVS encouraged school attendance of LAC as a vulnerable group prior to July 2020. Approximately 20% of children in care attended school in that period with the remainder working from home with the support of their placement.
- 8.15 In August 2020, Brent increased the weekly subsistence allowance for older children in care in semi-independent placements and eligible care leavers by £20 per week in line with the increase in Universal Credit. This change has been made until 31st March 2021 when it will be reviewed by the Council. This has been welcomed by young people, who fed back to the Corporate Parenting Committee about the positive impact this additional financial support has had on their lives during this pandemic.
- 8.16 The regular enrichment programme to combat social isolation continues for care leavers throughout the pandemic. This includes a regular youth club arrangement and involved events such as a socially distanced visit to Crazy Golf. Brent financially supported one young person to travel down from Manchester to be part of this.
- 8.17 The Care Leavers in Action (CLIA) group continued with face to face meetings when permitted. In September 2020, a face-to-face CLIA session was held in the Civic Centre which was also attended by the Strategic Director, CYP. The group worked on a health guide for care leavers, prepared by colleagues from the Clinical Commissioning Group and LAC Health Team. The group also worked on revising the Brent Care Leavers' Charter before going for a meal together. Another face-to-face session took place in October.

- 8.18 As part of Brent's strategic alliance with Barnardo's to increase positive destinations for care leavers, Barnardo's have been running relevant activities since July 2020. For example, a group of care leavers attended a camping trip in September 2020 for a long weekend in Herefordshire, involving outside activities such as paintballing and quad biking. Four young people attended this activity which focused on team building skills, patience, resilience, motivation and confidence building among young people. Barnardo's also held a workshop with young people called Pizza and Privilege including a discussion about race and the Black Lives Matter movement.
- 8.19 During National Care Leavers' Week (26th October-1st November 2020) Brent was jointly awarded first place in the National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum's Best Project Award for the enrichment activity that takes place.
- 8.20 A new programme to support young people into employment has started including a 'Seeking employment' WhatsApp group. The group focuses on inspiring care leavers seeking employment to come forward and be supported to take the next step. There are 40 young people in the group. Recently, 4 care leavers have been interviewed for Level 3 IT and HR apprenticeship opportunities. Another young person was interviewed in the second week of October 2020 for a year-long paid placement as a production runner in a top London advertising agency. Jobs are being posted every day and the Prospects advisors (Brent's commissioned provider supporting young people who are NEET) are part of the group, supporting young people with their CV and interview skills.
- 8.21 Brent currently has 43 care leavers in higher education. They were all provided with the necessary support at the beginning of the academic year such as access to therapeutic support, regular contact with their Personal Advisors and IT equipment where necessary.

## **9.0 Provision of Youth Justice Services**

- 9.1 As set out in the "Brent Youth Offending Service Post-Inspection Action Plan Implementation Brent report" being considered by Scrutiny Committee alongside this report, the YOS commenced the implementation of contingency planning on the same day the first government lockdown came into effect. The service worked closely with partners to ensure that changes to provision met local needs. Staff were initially home based and all young people received daily virtual contact from their case managers. Clarification of YOS staff keyworker status was provided within a week of lockdown. From the beginning of April, Brent YOS resumed face to face home visits and provided court based services in person. The 21 highest risk young people supported by the YOS were identified. A home visit screening tool was created to determine which of these young people required regular face to face contact. Safe visiting guidance was issued. Low risk young people were supervised through telephone or other digital media. Feedback from young people has largely been positive about this form of supervision.
- 9.2 Virtual Referral Order Panels were established and continue to operate. The YOS Risk, Safety and Wellbeing Multi-agency Risk Forum and the Resettlement and Aftercare Forum continue to take place virtually every month. Weekly Out of Court Disposal Decision Making Panels operate remotely.
- 9.3 Brent YOS based a team at court one day per week and additionally attended court as and when required. Brent received positive feedback from District Judges for its commitment to supporting young people at court in person throughout the lockdown. Coordinating Crown Court provision was more challenging. Two cases were escalated to the YJB. Both of these involved young people who were at risk of not appearing in court prior to their eighteenth birthday. HM Courts and Tribunal Service responded by prioritising both cases and they were subsequently both seen before they turned 18.

- 9.4 Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Youth Justice Board has suspended the publication of national statistics that show how local authorities have performed in relation to both reoffending and the number of first-time-entrants to the youth justice system – restrictions on the movement of analysts have limited access to Police National Computer data. Local performance measures must be viewed with caution as the courts have adjourned the majority of cases appearing before youth courts. This has had the effect of significantly delaying youth justice proceedings. By late summer, the number of cases appearing before the courts had begun to increase and a significant spike in court work is anticipated.
- 9.5 The extent to which changing court practice has affected Brent YOS is apparent when comparing the volume of court disposals and recorded youth crime occurring in the first quarter of 2019 to the same period in 2020:
- The number of Brent young people receiving court ordered sentences reduced from 62 to 13 (a 79% reduction)
  - The number of offences reduced from 139 to 26 (an 81% reduction)
- 9.6 Analysis of the custodial population shows that in September 2020, there were eleven young people from Brent residing in custody: seven were serving custodial sentences and a further four were remanded in custody awaiting sentencing. Brent's custody rate (0.49 per 1,000 Young People aged 10-17) is beginning to plateau after several years of significant decline.
- 9.7 From June, a limited number of office based activities took place in line with the loosening of some restrictions. However, plans that would have enabled a much wider phased return of YOS staff are likely to be delayed due to recent increases in the rate of Covid-19 infection.
- 9.8 Maintaining the provision of good youth justice services during the current public health pandemic has required flexible planning. Brent YOS continues to work in accordance with service, departmental and corporate plans. Additional strategic direction is contained in the Annual Brent Youth Justice and Recovery Plan. Emerging guidance and sector led planning is provided and co-ordinated during fortnightly meetings of the YJB London Region Heads of Service group.
- 9.9 Management Board oversight of response planning undertaken by the YOS has been consistent throughout the pandemic. This has included fortnightly written updates to Board members from the Chair (Operational Director, Integration and Improved Outcomes).
- 9.10 The annual YOS survey of young people and their families was completed in June 2020. This year the aim was to gain feedback on how the YOS had performed during lockdown, ascertain participant understanding of their youth justice disposal and to understand how satisfied young people were with staff and the services they receive. The survey was completed by 76 participants: 47 young people and 29 parent and carers. The majority of young people (96%) surveyed felt that the YOS had supported them to prevent further offending / re-offending. Ninety four percent did not feel as though they had missed out on any part of their YOS intervention whilst in lockdown.
- 9.11 The department successfully bid in October 2020 for a 3-year grant from the Youth Justice Board to deliver services to deal with the impact of Covid-19 on BAME communities. This funding will provide greater resource to intervene early with young people who are at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system and services are due to commence in early 2021.

## **10.0 Mental health and wellbeing**

- 10.1 Brent Council identified the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people as a council wide priority in Covid-19 recovery planning. A Council-wide task group convened in July and developed options to build resilience for children and young people and parents post the first Covid-19 lockdown by expanding mental health and wellbeing support. Work has included engaging children, young people and parents with emerging issues of isolation/loneliness, anxiety, bereavement and trauma due to Covid-19 lockdown. For example, children and young people who have developed anxiety resulting from self-isolating with parents/adults with multiple complexities such as severe mental health problems during lockdown; those who have lost their relatives; domestic conflict (eg teenage to parent; siblings to siblings); and anxiety amongst parents of children with SEND. This work has focused on emerging need for mental health support rather than on children and young people or parents with existing acute mental health problems pre-Covid-19.
- 10.2 Funding is being provided in the Autumn term through small grants to local charities and community groups to scale up support available for young people in Brent.
- 10.3 Counselling for LAC and care leavers has been expanded with more hours of support being made available and practitioners being supported to utilise clinical consultation provided by Brent Emotional Wellbeing Service, to help support them meet the needs of LAC and care leavers.
- 10.4 Young people, who have particularly struggled emotionally, have been referred to the Safe Base Brent Programme for online therapy. This programme has been expanded with increased hours of online counselling available for care leavers and is funded through Brent's Virtual School for Looked After Children. Additionally, details of online mental health and well-being support services such as 'Kooth' have been shared with young people.
- 10.5 Brent Council was informed in July that the local area had been successful in its bid to participate in the next wave of the NHS Mental Health Support Teams (MHST) Trailblazer programme. The project is being led by Brent CCG and the local CAMHS provider Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust (CNWL), supported by the local authority. MHSTs are a new service designed to help meet the mental health needs of children and young people in education settings. They are made up of senior clinicians and therapists, and Education Mental Health Practitioners (EMHPs). MHSTs are intended to add capacity to existing mental health support and add capacity. Each MHST will be responsible for a defined cluster or group of education settings, building a relationship with each, including school senior mental health leads. The aim is to ensure that the support offer reflects the needs of children and young people and education settings using clearly established expectations and ways of working that fit with the setting and the local system. The project will be fully operational from Autumn 2021, however, training for the EMHPs commences in November 2020
- 10.6 Brent is also participating in the Wellbeing for Education Return programme. This is a fully funded national initiative from the Department for Education, Department for Health and Social Care, Health Education England and Public Health England. The programme's aim is to support schools in meeting the emotional needs of pupils and staff during the pandemic. The programme runs to Easter 2021, and will provide training for key school staff to disseminate to colleagues, and provide a chance for schools to connect with local experts and each other to share knowledge and experience.
- 10.7 A recently published study shows that the mental health of children has improved after they returned to school in September. In Brent, several schools set aside their planned 'recovery' curriculum as children were eager to experience the full curriculum again.

## **11.0 Financial implications**

11.1 As at the end of October, the forecast pressures on the CYP General Fund budget as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic is £3.5m. This consists of £1.6m estimated cost pressures, £1.0m potential loss of income and £0.9m slippage in savings delivery. Figures are reviewed and revised on a two weekly basis.

11.2 These forecast costs as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic include:

- £1m pressure arising from additional placement costs for care leavers, where the lockdown has caused a delay in bidding for and moving into their own tenancies and increases in police protection cases in Localities;
- £0.3m additional payments for short break activities for Children with Disabilities. For families with children in need (s17 Children Act 1989) who needed emergency payments for food, utilities or other hardship issues; increased subsistence allowance to care leavers by £20 per week and providing care leavers with emergency payments at points of crisis;
- £0.2m additional staffing cost pressures;
- £0.1m the cost of keeping children's centres open for an additional three months thereby extending existing contracts with the current providers and as a result of the delay in the introduction of the FWC;
- £50k Parental Mental health training.

11.3 The impact of the potential loss of income in 2020/21 totals £1.0m from traded services with schools with the largest losses being Brent Music Service (£0.3m) and the Gordon Brown Outdoor Education Centre (£0.4m); the loss of £0.1m income from a Council owned Nursery for fee paying families for whom a childcare place has been discontinued and £0.2m which relates to the loss of revenue in issuing Education Penalty notices, training income and reduced income from other local authorities utilising the Ade Adepitan Short Break Centre in the borough.

11.4 If demand pressures increase in the system, it is anticipated there will be further budget pressures in particular due staffing costs to manage higher caseloads and the high cost of placements for Looked After Children and Care Leavers.

11.5 In 2020/21, it is estimated that there may be pressures of up to £0.2m against the Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) funded budgets. These pressures include potential Post 16 providers requesting for an additional year attendance due to COVID-19, the need for additional tutoring costs whilst Looked After Children (LAC) are out of school an estimate of agency supply staff to cover absences and ensuring children with additional needs e.g. visual and hearing impairment have the necessary equipment and infrastructure in their home to enable them to continue to follow a home teaching and learning schedule.

## **12.0 Legal implications**

12.1 The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 were published on Thursday 23 April and came into force on Friday 24 April. The regulations temporarily amend ten sets of regulations relating to children's social care in England, including those

related to statutory visits and statutory reviews for children subject of Child in Need or Child Protection plans and Looked After Children; fostering and adoption panels; complaints and representations. The Government in the associated Explanatory Memorandum said the changes are intended to help local authorities to "prioritise the needs of children, whilst relaxing some administrative and procedural obligations...but maintaining appropriate safeguards" during the coronavirus outbreak. The Regulations expired on 25 September.

12.2 Brent Council have not used the majority of the flexibilities in the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 and described in the Children's Social Care Covid 19 guidance. We have followed the principles in the guidance and have risk assessed all cases open to a social worker to ensure decisions made about contact and visiting are child-centred, risk and evidence based and collaborative. The key flexibilities used have been as follows:

- In relation to visits to looked after children in placements (Reg28) we have visited most children virtually, based on individual risk assessments. We have gradually increased the proportion of face to face visits as social distancing guidance has changed.
- Conducting virtual Child Protection Conferences and LAC Reviews using conference calling facilities rather than face to face in order to promote social distancing.
- Strategy meetings have been held virtually in the majority of cases to ensure social distancing is followed.
- Statutory home visiting for children subject of Child in Need and Child Protection plans have been risk-assessed and virtual visiting is taking place where appropriate.
- Flexibility around the 15-day timescale for Rapid Review meetings following referral to the National Safeguarding Review Panel have been used. This is to ensure agencies are able to respond effectively when balancing competing priorities

### **13.0 Equality implications**

13.1 The council's responsibilities under the Public Sector Equality Duty as set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 requires the Local Authority when exercising its functions to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited under the Act, to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who have a protected characteristic and those who do not share that protected characteristic. Protected characteristics include ethnic or national origins and colour or nationality. The Council has paid due regard to children and families' protected characteristics in providing targeted and risk assessed support based on child and family need throughout the pandemic period.

### **14.0 Consultation with ward members and stakeholders**

14.1 During the pandemic period, the Strategic Director CYP has participated in the regular Member web cast briefings to provide answers to any questions members have had regarding children, families and schools. The Lead Member for Children's Safeguarding, Early Help and Social Care, and Cabinet Member for Schools, Employment and Skills have been regularly briefed on service changes and impacts for children and families throughout the period.

14.2 Early years settings and schools in Brent have been actively supported and engaged throughout the period of the pandemic. The Strategic Director has met regularly with Headteachers and Chairs of Governors as described in Section 4 of the report.

14.3 The Children's Trust, chaired by the Strategic Director CYP, has been the formal governance structure for engagement with health partners to ensure that services for vulnerable children have been maintained throughout the period of the pandemic.



14.4 Union representatives have been regularly engaged, both through the Council's Health and Safety committee and Union representatives for school based staff with particular regards to the arrangements developed by schools to ensure children could attend school, through thorough risk assessment and protective measures being in place.

#### **15.0 Human Resources / Property Implications**

15.1 HR and property implications are set out in the body of the report.

#### **Related Documents:**

Brent Council and Covid-19: Service Response and Recovery report, Community and Wellbeing Scrutiny Committee 21st July 2020

**Report sign off:**

*GAIL TOLLEY*

Strategic Director Children and Young People