

7 July 2020		ITEM: 7
Children's Services Overview and Scrutiny Committee		
Safeguarding Children During COVID-19		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: N/A	
Report of: Joe Tynan, Interim Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help		
Accountable Assistant Director: Joe Tynan, Interim Assistant Director, Children's Social Care and Early Help		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services		
This report is public		

Executive Summary

This report is to inform Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee about the significant changes made to working practices within Thurrock Children's Social Care, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the measures that have been taken to ensure children continue to be supported and safeguarded.

1. Recommendation(s)

1.1 That the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Members are informed about the support and protection provided to all children and young people open to, or referred to, Children's Social Care or Early Help Services within the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic.

2. Introduction and Background

2.1 Thurrock Children's Social Care has a statutory duty to support children and families in need and to protect children who are experiencing significant harm or neglect, or are at risk of significant harm or neglect, in accordance with The Children Act 1989. Children are referred to Children's Social Care and their needs are assessed to determine the most appropriate level of support or protection. Children who are receiving a service from Thurrock Children's Social Care have an allocated Social Worker and are visited regularly in accordance with procedures.

2.2 Central Government introduced the *Coronavirus Bill 2020* in March 2020. It also published *Coronavirus (Covid-19): Guidance for Children's Social Care Services*. This legislation and respective guidance aimed to limit the spread of

the Covid-19 virus and enabled Local Authorities to prioritise care for people with most pressing needs, allowing keyworkers to perform more tasks remotely and with less paperwork. In essence, existing legislation was relaxed to provide greater flexibility when supporting children and young people during the Covid-19 outbreak. In parallel, many schools were closed and the majority of children and young people were no longer physically attending.

- 2.3 During the Covid-19 outbreak, Thurrock Children's Social Care has continued to deliver core services to children, young people and their families to ensure children are safeguarded. Practice has been adapted in line with Government directions and Public Health England advice regarding social distancing and working from home. This is for the protection of both staff members and the families with whom we are working.
- 2.4 New *Covid-19 Operational Procedures* were developed in early April 2020 to guide all Thurrock Children's Social Care staff about the newly implemented working practices, which included how risk would be assessed and responded to, the way visits would be undertaken and use of PPE. A risk assessment has been completed for every child or young person, to evaluate the appropriate level of contact and type of visit required. The data recording system has been updated to record and report data about these new ways of working.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 Clearly the emerging pandemic has universally presented an unprecedented situation, and posed a number of challenges to Children's Social Care. While many of the children known to Thurrock's Children's Social Care have already had a Child and Family Assessment, it was important to understand the current risks in light of the pandemic, and the impact this may pose to the child and their family, such as being isolated, having a limited support network, limited access to school, services and other professional involvement. It was considered that the best way to understand, evaluate, support and protect each child or young person within the context of the new restrictions of Covid-19, was to undertake a detailed risk assessment of each child's needs. In developing a *Covid-19 Risk Assessment* tool, Senior Managers liaised with other Local Authorities in the Eastern Region to compare and contrast their approaches to responding to social work practice within the pandemic.
- 3.2 A *Covid-19 Risk Assessment* was developed and completed for each child by their Social Worker. The Risk was evaluated using a strength-based approach and each child's case was RAG-rated (Red, Amber, Green) depending on the level of concern or risk. These completed Risk Assessments were verified and authorised by Team Managers. The frequency and type of visits were determined according to the RAG-rating for each child. Social Worker visits were either face-to-face (using PPE, socially-distancing and meeting outside, where possible), video calling via Whatsapp, or by telephone calls. All children would be contacted at least once per

fortnight, via face-to-face or virtual visits. Social Workers were required to record all visits with the child or family, according to the type of contact they had undertaken. The data system was amended to capture this specific information, so that Senior Managers could continue to monitor the type and frequency of contact with the families and to drive performance in this key area.

- 3.3 To provide additional confidence around the Risk Assessment and decision-making, all Red-rated risk assessments were given priority for auditing by the Quality Assurance Service and feedback was provided to the Social Work Teams. Subsequently, in April a large sample of Amber-rated Risk Assessments were audited by all managers. This process was repeated in May for Green-rated Risk assessments. The audits illustrated that in most instances the RAG-rating was concurred by the auditor for the Red and Amber cases. The findings for the Green cases are still being analysed.
- 3.4 A significant consideration within the risk assessments was whether the child was attending school. During this pandemic many children have not attended school, however the government's guidance made provision for vulnerable children, such as children with an allocated Social Worker, to continue to physically access school. Schools are typically a protective factor for children and teachers often identify issues of concern for children and highlight these to social care, due to their daily contact with them. Local schools usually make approximately one third of all contacts to Thurrock's Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH) expressing concerns for children's welfare. It was therefore recognised that vulnerable children not attending school could be at increased risk. Social Workers encouraged parents and carers to continue to send their children to school, however as there was no statutory duty for them to do so during Covid-19, a large percentage of families decided not to send their children to school.
- 3.5 Statutory Multi-Agency Meetings such as Safeguarding Investigations, Child Protection Conferences, Child In Need Meetings, Child Looked After (CLA) Reviews and court hearings have continued to take place, however, these have been undertaken virtually by video-calls or phone-calls. As we are moving towards recovery, plans are being implemented to move to a hybrid-model whereby some professionals will be physically in the meeting room at an appropriate distance, and others will join the meeting virtually.
- 3.6 Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, a very limited number of staff members from Children's Social Care, have attended the workplace at Civic Offices. They have attended on a rota basis and have been able to observe social-distancing rules while in the office. As we move towards recovery, there will continue to be a limited number of staff physically in the office and the majority of staff will continue to work from home. The *Covid-19 Operational Procedures* for Children's Social Care have recently been updated and the plan is to gradually revert to face-to-face visits with children and families, where it is safe to do so. Staff have access to a supply of PPE and the

Operational Procedures provide comprehensive guidance about safe usage and disposal of PPE.

- 3.7 As children and young people across the Borough start to return to school, it is anticipated there will be an increase in referrals to Children's Social Care. Over the period of the pandemic we have seen a sharp decline in referrals, however we have noticed that these have started to steadily increase in recent weeks. There is a plan in place to respond to this anticipated increase in demand. This situation will be closely monitored and if the demand exceeds capacity, some additional resources may be required on a time-limited basis.
- 3.8 The Department for Education (DfE) has allocated Thurrock six hundred and eleven laptops for children with an allocated Social Worker. These are due to be delivered shortly and will be distributed to children and young people to ensure they are able to continue with their education whilst accessing education on line.

4. Reasons for Recommendation

- 4.1 Members of the Committee are aware of, and have confidence in, the actions taken by Children's Social Care to safeguard children and young people during the pandemic.

5. Consultation (including Overview and Scrutiny, if applicable)

None

6. Impact on corporate policies, priorities, performance and community impact

- 6.1 Careful consideration has been given in balancing the need to support and protect children and young people while adhering to government guidance, which seeks to prevent the transmission of the Covid-19 virus.

7. Implications

7.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
Strategic Lead, Finance

Additional funds have been made available by the government to support vulnerable children, young people and families during Covid-19. Each case is considered on an individual basis. There is potential for strain on the budget for Children's Social Care, should services be further impacted upon by the virus.

7.2 Legal

Implications verified by: **Judith Knight**
Interim Deputy Head of Legal (Social Care and Education)

The Coronavirus Act 2020 largely came into force on 25th March 2020. The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus)(Amendment) Regulations 2020, made under the Act, relax certain requirements of the Care Planning, Placement and Review (England) Regulations 2010 on Local Authorities. These regulations are in force until 25th September 2020.

7.3 **Diversity and Equality**

Implications verified by: **Roxanne Scanlon**
Engagement and Project Monitoring Officer

The service is committed to a practice which promotes inclusion and diversity, and will carry out its duties in accordance with the Equality Act 2010 and related Codes of Practice and Anti-discriminatory policies.

7.4 **Other implications** (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder, or Impact on Looked After Children)

Social workers and their managers are best placed to make professional judgements of risks and protective factors. Where face-to-face work is deemed necessary, practitioners should take account of Public Health England (PHE) [advice on social distancing](#) and minimising the spread of infection. While face-to-face visits to children and young people are deemed to be the best way to assess and support them, there are alternative ways to keep in touch if it is unsafe to visit in person. It is expected that these will be utilised appropriately and proportionately in response to the risk assessment undertaken for the child or young person, on a case by case basis.

8. **Background papers used in preparing the report** (including their location on the Council's website or identification whether any are exempt or protected by copyright):

None

9. **Appendices to the report**

None

Report Author:

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Children's Social Care and Early Help