

2 June 2020		ITEM: 9
Corporate Parenting Committee		
Support Provided to Care Leavers and Children Looked After During COVID-19		
Wards and communities affected: All	Key Decision: Non-Key	
Report of: Luke Froment, Service Manager CLA		
Accountable Assistant Director: Joseph Tynan, Assistant Director, Children's Services		
Accountable Director: Sheila Murphy, Corporate Director of Children's Services		
This report is Public		

Executive Summary

This report is to update Members of the Corporate Parenting Committee on Support provided to Care Leavers and Children Looked After during COVID-19.

1. Recommendation(s)

- 1.1 That Corporate Parenting Members are informed about support provided to Children Looked After and Care Leavers within the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic.**

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 On the 24th April 2020 the Government amended our regulated duties to Looked After Children via *The Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020*. This legislation reduces our obligations in a number of areas and these changes are temporary until 25th September 2020. Key changes are:
- The duty for Social Workers to undertake visits to Children in Care at least six-weekly has been temporarily removed, and can now be completed *virtually* via video or phone call, rather than face-to-face.
 - CLA reviews do not have to be completed six-monthly. Previously the law required an Independent Review of each Child in Care every six months.

- 2.2 The current pandemic has introduced new elements of risk for everyone. Within this context the Local Authority has considered new ways of working to ensure that statutory duties can be fulfilled and our Children and Young People are safe and appropriately supported.
- 2.3 This report sets out the actions taken by Children's Social Care to address the needs for Children who are Looked After and Young People Leaving Care and ensure the best possible support during this difficult and unprecedented time.

3. Issues, Options and Analysis of Options

- 3.1 The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic presents significant challenges and complexity, including the way in which Children's Social Care services are delivered, requiring different ways of working which mitigate risk.
- 3.2 Local Authorities have duties and powers to assist Young People in Care and those who are leaving and have left Local Authority care. As a Corporate Parent our duties to all Children in Care and Care Leavers must have regard to the need:
- to act in the best interests, and promote the physical and mental health and well-being, of those Children and Young People;
 - to encourage those Children and Young People to express their views, wishes and feelings;
 - to take into account the views, wishes and feelings of those Children and Young People;
 - to help those Children and Young People gain access to, and make the best use of, services provided by the Local Authority and its relevant partners;
 - to promote high aspirations, and seek to secure the best outcomes, for those Children and Young People;
 - for those Children and Young People to be safe, and for stability in their home lives, relationships and education or work; and,
 - to prepare those Children and Young People for adulthood and independent living.
- 3.3 This includes: visiting, engaging and building meaningful relationships with Children, Young People and their Carers.

4. Issues

- Continued risk to Children, Young People, Families and Social Workers by the current pandemic needs to be managed to minimise risk to all.
- The need to ensure effective planning including multi-agency forums.
- Difficulty and disruption in building and maintaining meaningful relationships with Children, Young People and their Families.
- Supporting an accurate and age appropriate understanding of the

current social context on behalf of our Children and Young People.

- Potential disruption and delay within Family Court Proceedings.
- Disruption in the education of our Children and Young People.
- Disruption in usual contact arrangements for Children and Young People.

5. Actions taken to address identified issues

5.1 Risk Assessment

A Coronavirus Risk Assessment has been undertaken for each Looked After Child and Care Leaver to determine their level of risk (Green - low, Amber - moderate, Red - high) and their Risk Management Plan (Safety Plan), during this period when services to Children and Families are impacted upon by Coronavirus. Each Young Person's plan includes specific details of how often the Child or Young Person will be seen by members of the professional and family network but also new arrangements such as telephone or video calls to monitor their welfare and safety. Analysis of risk by practitioners include:

- The plan that the placement / Young Person has in place to keep safe and well during the outbreak, including access to housing, medication, health support, food and heating.
- The impact on the family/placement, Child or Young Person of self-isolation and illness – especially Care Leavers living alone or in semi-independent accommodation, or who have a Child.
- The risks of not visiting the Child or Young Person face to face.
- The plan for a Young Person if a residential or semi-independent unit has to close its doors due to levels of staff illness, and is no longer able to look after the Young Person or if a Foster Carer becomes ill and unable to care for a Child in placement.

5.2 Visiting Children and Young People

Much of the work that Social Workers do to support and safeguard Children involves direct contact. This enables Social Workers to build relationships with Children and Young People and those involved in their care. Direct face-to-face contact is also an opportunity to do direct work on specific issues.

Social Workers and their Managers are able to make judgements about visiting which prioritises Children's welfare as paramount, within the statutory framework, balancing:

- risks to Children
- risks to Families
- risks to the workforce

Guidance has been provided to Social Workers and Personal Advisors identifying steps to be taken to minimise risk to Children, Young People and Social Workers, Foster Carers and others involved in the care arrangements for our Children and Young People. This is informed by Government guidance and focuses on social distancing techniques upon entering and leaving family homes or placements.

5.3 Planning including multi-agency meetings

Use of technology is supporting Social Workers to ensure that meetings such as Child Looked After reviews and Strategy Meetings are continuing to be convened and to make effective plans for Children and Young People. This means that professionals working with Children, including Social Workers, education, care providers, health, youth offending and the Virtual School, are able to contribute to planning and provision of services.

5.4 Supporting the understanding of Children and Young People

Literature has been distributed to Carers to help explain the current pandemic to Children and Young People in child friendly language that aims to keep them informed without raising their anxieties.

This is reinforced by conversations between Social Workers and care providers who are supporting Children and Young People to understand the pandemic, the risks, and what this means for them. This has been particularly important with older Children and Young Adults who may be more at risk if they are leaving their placement/home to visit family or friends.

The Mind of My Own app is used in Thurrock with Children and Young People and is an easily accessible and effective route by which to contact their Social Worker or Independent Reviewing Officer and provide feedback on services.

5.5 Supporting the Court Process

Our work ensures that court proceedings can continue to progress permanency plans for Children, with minimal delay. The Legal Team have been in close communication with the Principle Judge of the Local Family Courts in order to ensure an effective response to the changing situation on behalf of both the Courts and the Local Authority.

Hearings are proceeding remotely where possible and families assisted to participate in the Court Process through the provision of access to Information Technology.

5.6 Supporting Education and Employment

The Virtual School is working closely with Social Workers and Foster Carers to make sure that the educational needs of our Children and Young People are being met. This has included clear guidance from the Virtual Head

Teacher in relation to school attendance, additional equipment needed or specific support to support continued learning.

To support education and to enable Young People to access e-learning, laptops have been purchased for Young People by Children's Social Care. There is capacity to provide more laptops through a recent Government initiative to support vulnerable Young People during Covid-19. Personal Advisors have liaised with colleges and universities to gain a clear update of what Care Leavers may require. Personal Advisors have also continued to support Care Leavers with applying for college/university placements and financial support for courses due to commence in September 2020.

Where Care Leavers have ceased to be employed due to the impact of Covid-19, referrals have been made to Inspire to support with finding new employment and Personal Advisors are working closely to support this. The Local Authority has provided Care Leavers with support in claiming benefits and support to ensure that they do not get in debt or risk losing their homes. Personal allowances and/or food parcels and supermarket vouchers have been provided for some Care Leavers where they may be waiting for benefits claims to be progressed.

5.7 Care Leavers Housing

The Aftercare Team are working closely with Headstart Housing to ensure that any housing or tenancy related difficulties are identified and addressed. Personal Advisors have continued to support Care Leavers in liaising with the Housing Department.

5.8 Supporting family contact

The Oaktree Contact Centre has been closed in order to reduce the risk of Covid-19 infection. New ways of delivering contact for children utilising video calls are in place. For very young Children, where there are particular difficulties with virtual contact, which might impact on their attachment, there is some provision for face-to-face contact. The decision to facilitate any face-to-face contact is made on a case-by-case basis and subject to a risk assessment.

6. Reasons for Recommendation

6.1 Members of the Committee are aware of the impact Covid-19 has on Children Looked After and Care Leavers and how we are meeting our duties.

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

7.1 Not applicable

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

8.1 None

9. Implications

9.1 Financial

Implications verified by: **David May**
**Strategic Lead – Finance Children's
DSG and Schools I Corporate 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 a potential for strain on the budget for Children's social care should services be further impacted upon by the virus.

9.2 Legal

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

The Council has general duty to safeguard and promote the welfare of any child that it looks after under Section 22(3) of the Children Act 1989 and it must have regard to the Corporate Parenting Principles in Section 1(1) of the Children and Social Work Act 2017. The Local Authority has further duties under the Children Act 1989 to provide advice and assistance to care leavers which includes undertaking assessment of needs and completing a pathway plan. Further detail on the content of these is found in the Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010.

These duties remain in place save that the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 allows some changes to the visiting and review requirements for Looked After Children until 25th September 2020 as set out in the report.

9.3 Diversity and Equality

Implications verified by: **Rebecca Lee**
Community Development Officer

The Service is committed to 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 policy.

9.4 Other implications (where significant) – i.e. Staff, Health, Sustainability, Crime and Disorder)

Social workers and their managers are best placed to make professional judgements of risks and protective factors in place. 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. There are many ways to keep in touch with a child, young person or family without physical face-to-face contact and it is expected that these will be utilised appropriately and proportionately in response to the risk assessment undertaken for the child on a case by case basis

10. 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

11. Appendices to the report

- None

Report Author:

Luke Froment
Children Looked After, Service Manager