

Responding to COVID-19: issues affecting services for children and young people

Briefing Note: 2, 1/05/20

This is the second in a series of briefings to share findings from our ongoing intelligence-gathering on the impact of COVID-19 on the children’s sector, based on issues that professionals are seeing in the course of their work. If you would like to be involved in this activity, please contact [Scott Compton](#) at The Children’s Society.

We will continue to collect, collate and analyse responses through the pandemic. Please help us to collect as much evidence as possible on how COVID-19 is affecting frontline children’s service providers by [completing or sharing the evidence collection form](#).

This week’s findings are based on contributions from 77 individual respondents, representing the following areas:	No. of respondents	Geographical reach	No. of respondents
Child protection/safeguarding	11	East	19
Children's social care	10	West Midlands	11
Family Support	10	North West	8
Health	7	London	7
Education	6	South West	7
Youth Services	6	South East	4
Mental Health	3	Scotland	3
Other	11	East Midlands	2
		National	2
		North East	1
		Wales	1
		Yorkshire	1

Theme 1: Supporting children with complex (tier three) needs

A key feature of this week’s findings is increased concerns among respondents about how the lockdown is impacting on children’s mental health, and secondly, how it is impeding their ability to safeguard children with more complex needs. Respondents reported increases in anxiety levels in children caused by their social isolation, and their heightened concerns about the impact of the lockdown on their education and their social and familial relationships (including domestic abuse). Some children are defying the social isolation guidance, resulting in them being reported missing. The lockdown may therefore, unexpectedly, be contributing to some local areas experiencing increases in children going missing. It was reported that “the risk of exploitation [of children] is currently high”. Perhaps related to this, professionals also reported increased levels of contact between children and the police as the latter seek to enforce the ‘lockdown’, elevating the risk of children being criminalised. In operational terms, the findings discussed here are indicative of potential increase in future demand for safeguarding, mental health and other tier three services.

A second strand of this theme is the impact of social distancing on child-centred safeguarding practice for children with tier three needs. While services have developed innovative practice using digital technology, respondents noted limitations in their use

with children with complex needs. For instance, professionals are unable to conduct home visits regularly, or when they do, they are unable to see children alone or there are fewer safe spaces for children to report their safeguarding concerns in confidence. Even where contact is made, there is a worry that professionals are not really hearing from the children themselves due to the presence of others. Professionals are also having trouble in maintaining relationships with children and keeping in contact with young people with tier three safeguarding needs - “[these children] are not being seen by professionals, even their social workers”. Another cause of the diminished contact with children with complex needs is the confusion about the meaning of ‘essential visits’, with varying interpretations across services- “We get very mixed answers regarding what classes as an ‘essential’ visit. It's taken weeks for senior management to say that most visits could be done via video calls, risking the health and safety of the workers and the families we work with”.

One third-sector manager of a service for some of the hardest to reach children in the care system noted that seeing young people face-to-face is currently not viable because of the lack of PPE. The difficulties in maintaining and building relationships has led in some cases to “a change in behaviour from the young people that has undone almost a year’s worth of work”. Another professional reported that they are completely unable to support families with their applications for the EU Settlement Scheme as the application requirements cannot be achieved virtually.

Possible solutions:

- Government should invest in free, child-friendly services accessible through multiple digital channels. Government should also develop a communications campaign across TV, radio and online on how children and young people can maintain their mental health.
- Government should develop child-friendly messaging on the lockdown aimed at children, clearly explaining the reasons and how the impact on their, education and other services will be addressed. This should also apply to children with particular needs – for instance Looked After Children, children in transition between children and adult services, and children with complex communication needs.
- Young people should have the opportunity to ask questions at the daily Downing Street press conference.
- Government should explore avenues for enhancing safeguarding services for children during this period of social distancing.

Theme: 2 Digital technology

Services and professionals have responded to the current challenge by adapting their provision using digital technology. Examples include the use of video-conferencing for multi-agency working and enhanced use of digital platforms and telephones for needs assessments and maintaining contact with children and their families. There was evidence that where professionals are using digital technology for assessments, they were making more sophisticated analysis of the risks and protective factors within children’s networks.

However there are significant difficulties. Before the current emergency, there were recognised challenges with interoperability between systems of service providers¹.

¹ Social Care Institute for Excellence & British Association of Social Workers. 2019. [Digital Capabilities for Social Workers: Stakeholder Report](#)

Across this week's responses, there are reports of infrastructure challenges for services in their transition to providing services virtually. The difficulties include lack of IT systems for remote working, lack of staff training to use new systems and different organisational standards for data security impeding multi-agency working and information sharing with "massively conflicting advice" about which platforms are suitable for meeting with service users and lots of local variation. For instance, some organisations use Zoom while others will not allow staff to join professional meetings conducted through the platform due to security concerns.

Respondents also reported challenges with engaging with children and their families through technology. The research highlighted issues of confidentiality, privacy and verification with respondents concerned that they couldn't ensure 'safe spaces' for children to access online support. There were reported issues about a digital divide and exclusion – "Many of the young people I am working with do not have the IT to support video calling, or to access the internet". Therefore, even where services have moved online, some young people are not accessing them because they lack internet connectivity, or the resources are not being provided inclusively – particularly problematic for non-native English speakers. Multiple professionals also reported an increasing disengagement of young people from contact, particularly on the telephone – "It started off ok at the beginning of the lockdown and has progressively dwindled as time has gone on".

Possible solutions

- The government should issue guidance on standard security requirements for digital platforms and publicise any new guidance on information sharing and compliance with the Data Protection Act 2018.
- The government should create a fund to support the sector to upgrade digital infrastructure to meet agreed security and safety standards.
- The government should ensure that the digital support package – with free laptops and 4G internet - is available to all families known to social care.

Theme 3: Workforce

A recurring theme in this week's survey was the lack of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) and hand sanitizers for staff whose role involves regular contact with children and their families. This has led to rationing of PPE by managers with the result that professionals are purchasing their own PPE. Respondents noted that, besides causing them anxiety about their own safety, PPE shortages were also impeding their ability to discharge their safeguarding duties under Section 47. Others reported that the lack of PPE was affecting their work in finding appropriate placements for children or maintaining placement stability. It is worth highlighting here that safeguarding work with children cannot be accomplished without adequate PPE for staff.

A second dimension of this theme was the impact of the COVID-19 policy response on workforce stability – e.g. increased absences due to staff illness, concerns about funding leading to staff who do vital safeguarding work being furloughed, coupled with inherent inflexibility of the furloughing scheme. Respondents who worked with children in children homes, a demography with particularly complex needs, reported that workforce stability is adversely impacting on their work to build relationships, improve attachments and maintain emotional stability for the children in their care.

Possible solutions

- The government should ensure availability of PPE to essential, frontline staff. Those who have purchased this privately should be swiftly refunded.



- All frontline children's services staff should be prioritised for testing.
- The government should consult about workforce planning, involving the sector and children and their families.

